

- FIRST BLOCK : Contexts of American Literature**
- SECOND BLOCK : The Scarlet Letter**
- THIRD BLOCK : Huckleberry Finn**
- FOURTH BLOCK : American Prose**
- FIFTH BLOCK : American Poetry-1**

**MAEN-05**  
**AMERICAN LITERATURE**

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**CONTEXTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE**



Block



## BLOCK INTRODUCTION : THE MULTIPLE CONTEXTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Hello! May I begin our interaction over this postgraduate course in American literature by providing you with a brief introduction to myself and to why and how I chose to write the study material for this course?

I teach at the Department of English in Hindu College which is affiliated to the University of Delhi. My interest in the study of American literature took off during my own M.A. days when we were required to study a compulsory paper on the nineteenth century American prose classics including Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some, if not all, of these books I am sure you are already familiar with. Later, I extended my readings in this area by using them as part of my research for my M.Phil.

What attracted me towards American Studies was my perception that both India and America are multicultural and multidenominal societies, but their heterogeneous cultures are often treated as one homogenous mass. Brahmanical Hinduism is the dominant strand in the case of India and White Puritanism (which I shall describe in detail in another section) in the case of America. Not surprisingly, therefore, "Indian" culture is frequently equated with Hindu culture just as "American" culture is often equated with Puritan culture. As a consequence, the "others" in either culture, the so-called minority communities--Muslims, Christians, Dalits, etc. in the case of India and Blacks, Hispanics, Catholics, etc. in the case of America--are marginalised and even made invisible.

Minority identities within the American social context have been ignored over a period of time. This is especially evident in the treatment of traditional academic disciplines such as American history, American literary history and American literature. From these it would seem that all American culture was the product of white Anglo-Saxon Puritan emigration and encampment through the seventeenth century on to territories now known as the United States of America. The Puritan arrival into the New World (America) from the Old World (Europe) would then be the only context for the beginnings of the American cultural enterprise, including the production of its earliest literary texts. Indeed, American literature of later eras are usually evaluated again and again with reference to its antecedents in the very first Puritan undertaking. Eminent experts such as Henry Nash Smith, R.W.B. Lewis and A.N. Kaul, who were each highly influential in the 1950s and 1960s, base their approach to American literature on the 'myth and symbol' school of criticism.

The straitjacketed canon of American literature excludes certain different contexts, as crucial as the Puritan to the production of the texts inside as well as outside the canon. In the Block that follows I hope to discuss some of the other contexts of American literature which inevitably have been sidelined by the exclusive description of the Puritans' arrival upon the "virgin soil" and their effort to "sanctify" it by recreating a "modern Jerusalem" there. Thus I shall discuss how the Puritans edged out and exterminated the native aboriginal populations, the "Red Indians," from their hereditary homesteads. You will also study incidents of conflict and dissidence within the Puritan community itself as it tried to settle down in an alien location; how the leaders inflicted ruthless retribution upon real or imagined rebels of their "holy mission"; and how they exploited the labour of indentured servants of European origin and chattel slaves of African origin in order to build up a civilization out of a wilderness.

You might rightly wish to know why it is necessary to have an awareness of so many contexts before you can study the texts of American literature in this course. My answer to you is that you can fully understand the texts you have to study only if you know about the development of American history and society. What I am trying to suggest is that the texts and the contexts of any literature are intimately interrelated, that certain contexts foreground certain texts just as certain texts foreground certain contexts. For example, to fully understand the mosaic of Indian society and culture today, you need to know the multicultural contexts of Indian history - Muslims and British intrusions that mixed with the Dravidian and Aryan. Similarly an understanding of the development of American history and society based predominantly on one context only, that of the Puritan migration and settlement will give you an incomplete picture of the literature of America.

At this point let me tell you in this course 'America' refers to what is now known as the United States of America and not the continents of North and South America which include besides the present day USA, many other countries like Canada and the countries of South America.

New concepts mentioned in this Block are explained in the Glossary at the end of the Block.

Home sickness, epidemics, deaths--the list of troubles encountered by the earliest English settlers in America were many. The Chesapeake, the "Red Indians" of the region, instigated by their illustrious leader, Powhatan, resented the coming of the outsiders. They thought that the English, in not organizing any agricultural activities on English lands, needlessly exploited their resources and exertions. Skirmishes ensued soon. The English were especially savage in their assaults, especially because they were extremely dependent upon these people whom they despised and therefore

The Puritans were certainly not the first inhabitants, not even the first settlers from Europe in the American continent. As you are aware, many a voyage of exploration and discovery starting with that of the Italian sailor Cristoforo Colombo (better known as Christopher Columbus) in 1491 found its way, by accident or intention, to the shores of what was later to be called America. These voyages extended for over a century, but till the 1580s none of them, or so records suggest, were manned by Englishmen. Englishmen were resolutely engrossed in their interminable conflicts through these decades, and it was as late as 1584 that Sir Walter Raleigh despatched an English ship to investigate if it was possible to colonise other lands. Another attempt took off in 1606, and in this instance the energetic intruders decided to establish a settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, named after their Virgin Queen. The settlement however, suffered from many disasters.

**1.1 INTRODUCTION: THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE PURITAN PRESENCE IN NEW ENGLAND**

In this Unit I shall throw light upon the context of the Puritan migration from the Old World to the New World and the emergence of a "new" American culture and literature. Along with information about the New England Puritans, I shall also present a range of extracts from the writings of these Puritans about themselves and their mission in America. You will see from these writings, which are self-justificatory in tone, that the Puritans thought that they and they alone were the founders of American civilization, and not the inhabitants of the territory before or after. Gradually, over the centuries, people accepted the Puritan view as the dominant view of American history.

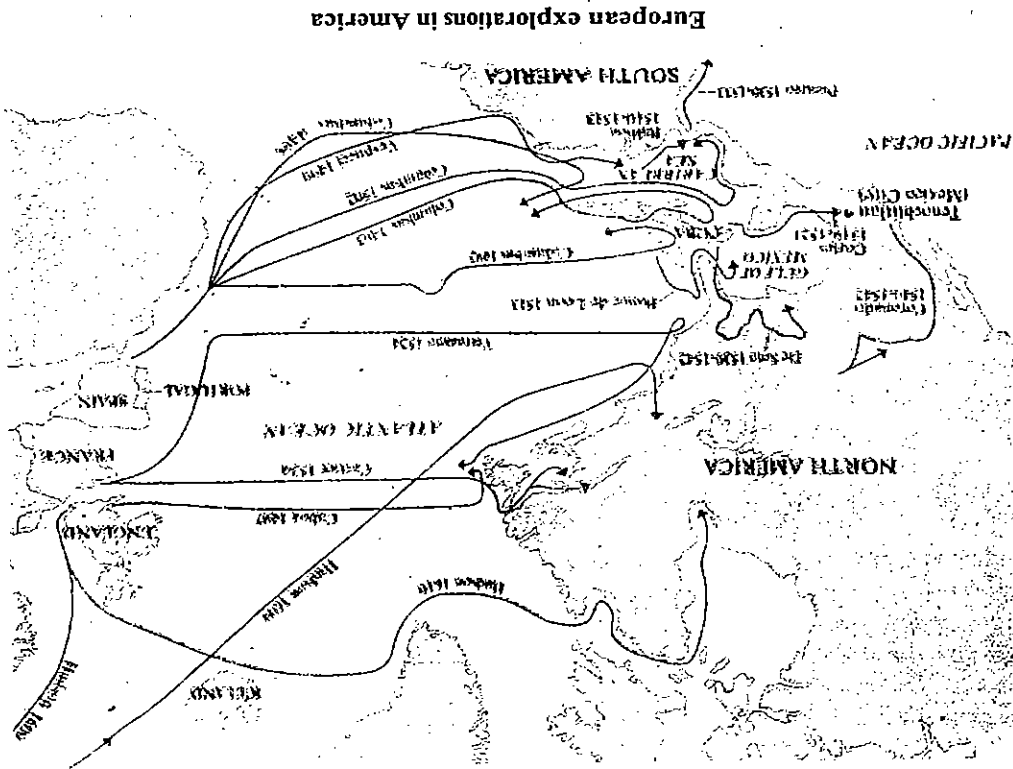
**1.0 OBJECTIVES**

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction: The pre-history of the Puritan presence in New England
- 1.2 Who were the New England Puritans?
- 1.3 The New England Puritans as they saw themselves and their mission in America.
- 1.4 The emergence of Puritanism as the hegemonic American ideology.
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Readings.

Structure

**UNIT 1 THE PURITAN CONTEXT**

determined to demonstrate an absolute superiority over them. In order to punish a haughty tribe, the English would resort to mass massacre of its members. Some



European explorations in America

Englishmen had a tendency to wander off to stay with the relatively affluent Indians, with their organized and abundant food supplies, or to trade with them. The Jamestown authorities burned, flayed and killed their own people. Meanwhile, thousands of settlers died from starvation and illnesses.

To save the declining Virginia settlement, the Virginia Company, which had sponsored the settlement in the first place, soon realised that the colonists had to be given a personal interest in what they were doing. They would not work hard to raise food for the company itself; the power of individual enterprise had to be put to work. In return for a small annual quit rent, settlers were allowed to take up sizeable tracts of land for themselves. The time of hardships was soon at an end. Then, in 1619 a legislative body allowed the Virginia settlers, to own and cultivate the land which transformed them from unimportant employees of an old company to significant citizens of a new country. The tobacco crop planted experimentally in 1612 yielded such high profits from London that by 1620 an amazing "gold rush" was under way for tobacco land. At last, Virginia appeared to be evolving into a prosperous settlement.

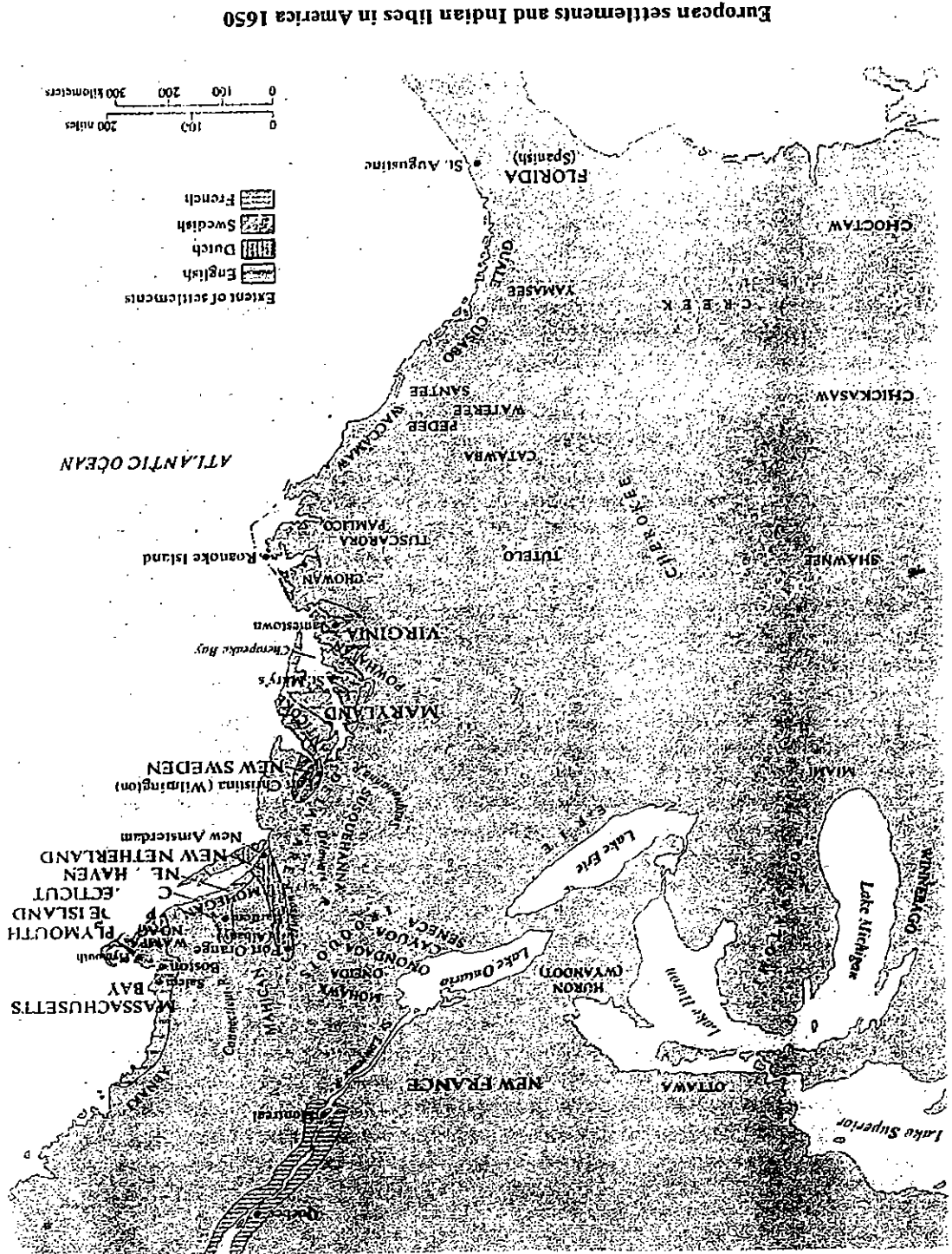
Up north, towards the eastern edge of the American continent in the meanwhile, the first Puritan fleet, transporting its four hundred devout souls, sailed around the tip of Cape Cod and stationed itself finally at the Plymouth harbour off Massachusetts Bay. The first settlers who came to Massachusetts thus in 1620 to found a dedicated community were the Pilgrims. Fleeing from the hardened depravities of the Old World to the New World, they established their homesteads in an obscure stretch close to Plymouth. Ten years later came the Great Puritan Migration from England, followed by an astonishingly numerous rabble bringing thousands of settlers, the largest single expedition of English people in the seventeenth century. Puritan settlements sprang up at Dorchester, Boston, Watertown, Roxbury, Mystic and Lynn. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was now fully launched.

By 1640, religious sectarianism surfaced, forcing renegades or rebels to abandon Massachusetts to develop Rhode Island, which was chartered in 1644. Others,

The Puritan Context

enticed by fantasies of fabled affluence left for richer haunts southward to the west of the Connecticut River. In 1639 certain towns had already adopted the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut as the colony's constitution. By 1662 a royal charter had been issued that authenticated Connecticut's independent status. The earliest settlements emerged in New Hampshire in 1623. After endless debate between ambitious English agents and Massachusetts authorities, it became (by 1680) an autonomous territory of the Crown. The status of Maine, which had been settled in the 1630s, was troubled likewise until 1691, when it was made part of Massachusetts.

At the end of the century, New England, as the entire region was named, was a flourishing new enclave within the English empire.



European settlements and Indian tribes in America 1650

The New England way of life was sharply polarised against the way of life of the Virginians as well as similar materialistically inspired immigrants. Virginians aspired to ownership of property, either as tobacco farm or as cotton plantation, and needed to employ indentured servants and chattel slaves, to acquire the trappings of aristocracy. New Englanders, on the contrary, aimed at the actualisation of an ideal. For them, there had been no option but to flee their Old England which was being taken over by Satan. They considered themselves to be God's special emissaries on a "mission into the wilderness" seeking to establish "a Jerusalem renewed." This, in essence, was the Puritan project in America.

## 1.2 WHO WERE THE NEW ENGLAND PURITANS?

I am sure you know from your study of Indian history that many sects like Buddhism and Jainism sprang up as a protest against the abuses of Brahminical rituals and ceremonies which they found were devoid of true spiritual change. Similarly Puritanism, as Perry Miller has remarked in his classic study on the subject, began as an agitation within the Church of England in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

It was a movement for reform of that institution, and as such hardly an alternative denomination to Anglicanism, which was the dominant theology. In the 1530's the Church of England had broken with the Roman Catholic Church. By the inception of Elizabeth I's reign in 1558, it had proceeded a certain distance in this revolt, had become Protestant, had disestablished the monasteries and recitified many Papist abuses. Puritanism was the belief that the reform should be continued, that more abuses remained to be corrected, that practices still survived from the days of Papacy which should be renounced, that the Church of England should be restored to the "purity" of the first-century Church as established by Christ Himself. In the 1560s, when the advocates of purification first acquired the name of Puritans, no one, not even the most radical, knew exactly how far the process was to go or just what the ultimate goal would be. Down to the days of the so-called Puritan Revolution there was never any agreement on this point, and in the end this failure of unanimity proved to be the undoing of English Puritanism. Many Puritans desired that only certain ceremonies be abolished or changed. Others wanted ministers to preach more sermons, make up their own prayers on the inspiration of the moment rather than read set forms out of a book. Others went further and proposed a revision of the whole form of ecclesiastical government. But whatever the shade or complexion of their Puritanism, Puritans were those who wanted to continue a movement which was already underway. Their opponents, the Anglicans, were those who felt that with the enthronement of Elizabeth I and with the "Elizabethan Compromise" within the Church, things had gone far enough. The Elizabethan Compromise, according to the Anglicans, had adequately eliminated the excesses of Roman Catholicism. They wanted to call a halt, just where they were, and stabilize at that point.

Thus the issue between the two views, though large enough, still involved only a limited number of questions. On every thing except matters upon which the Puritans wanted further reform, there was essential agreement. The Puritans who opted to go to New England were among the more extreme--though by no means the most extreme that the movement produced. Even before their departure in 1620 they had gone to the lengths of formulating a concrete platform of church organisation which they wished to see instituted in England in lieu of the episcopal system.

By the 1620, the Puritans had moved the Church of England a long way toward their way of thinking, but then a startling reversal occurred. The new king, Charles I, working with those who disagreed with the Puritans, initiated a determined counter-offensive. First, the Anglicans, supported by the monarch, managed to maintain the episcopal system. Second, they sustained the existing infrastructure for devotional services--elegant attire for the priest, glorious objects of gold and coloured glass in use during worship, the altar itself treated as a site of almost miraculous significance.



Third, the prayers of the Prayer Book, and the sacraments, were venerated by the Anglicans as the centre of all worship--especially communion, for it represented the Body of Christ.

The Puritans were shocked to witness these, what they thought to be, retrogressive tendencies within the church, and even more appalled when hundreds of priests who resisted them were dismissed from their pulpits. Like everyone else, Puritans believed that the Church of England was the driving force, the very centre of national life. If it were corrupted, chaos itself would descend upon the country. England, the Puritans asserted, was in an anarchic condition. There was disorder and discord all over: gambling, whoring, thievery, rape and murder were routine occurrences. Excessive self-indulgence and self-gratification seemed to have become the norms of social conduct. The Puritans articulated the emergent bourgeois ethos which celebrated temperance, caution, thrift and hard work. They held that God the Father, who must punish even as he protects, would surely not tolerate the sins of his children and would chastise them by sending down plagues and other disasters. Only when England possessed a fully purified church, the Puritans said, would God cease punishing the English for their sins.

The Anglicans pointed out that by law the king and his officers of the Church of England were entitled to take all decisions in religious matters and insisted that everyone's duty was to obey them, not to grumble and grimace. All agitation ought to halt. The Puritans, tenacious and stubborn, refused to oblige. To listen to humans masquerading as God's ministers would be tantamount to bringing back to the Church of England that "vast suffocating fog" of Papist superstition and irrationality that the Protestant Reformation was supposed to have swept away. Across the English Channel on the European continent this was the period when the powerful armies of Roman Catholic monarchs were sweeping from victory to victory as the Counter-Reformation against Protestantism launched by the Roman Catholic Church mounted in enthusiasm. Suspicious Puritans then alleged that what the Anglicans were doing was part of a covert Roman Catholic conspiracy, working through the king and his followers, to destroy Protestantism in England.

But still more fundamental to their differences was the Anglican and the Puritan argument over the nature of mankind. To the Puritans, human beings in their "natural" condition are totally depraved, their reason effectively impaired by their passion. If any are "saved"--forgiven their sins and going to heaven--it is entirely because God has willed it so, not because of anything that individual persons may have done on their own. The Anglicans recoiled from all this. They believed, of course, that human beings are all sinners, but also that God has made them discriminating creatures. Ethical choice, they said, is "the candle of the Lord." Thus, to some degree we have a free will; that is, we do have a role in deciding our personal destinies. The Anglicans believed that if we choose to live in God's way, take the sacraments regularly, and accept the salvation that a benign God has offered to all, we are saved.

The important thing was not so much what faith we had, but how we treated each other. Certainly we must love God, as the First Table of the Ten Commandments decreed, but equally important were some other questions. Are we loving to each other? Obedient and dutiful to appropriate worldly authority? And mindful of good works? These were what the last six of the Ten Commandments--the Second Table--called for, and it was here that Anglicans laid their stress.

The Puritans emphasised upon the first four of the Ten Commandments--the First Table--which ordered humanity to revere God and to glorify Him and to have no other thing or person in their lives before Him. The dilemma was that human beings were so naturally rotten, their passion so predominant upon their reason, that every instinct and inclination turned them away from God. They chose evil knowingly.

Do we all, then, go to hell? No. The Puritans believed that God, for reasons known only to Him, had decided to save some of humanity from that everlasting torture. He had sent Jesus Christ to save these persons, who are the elect from all eternity. In the course of their lives after painstaking, prayerful and prolonged inner studies, they suddenly learn that they are indeed saved. In that overwhelming moment the old, sinful person within, i.e. Adam, dies, and a new, sinless person, i.e. Christ is born. Thereafter, the persons so saved will by divine grace live virtuous and inviolate lives, clearly designed to bear witness to the grandeur of God.

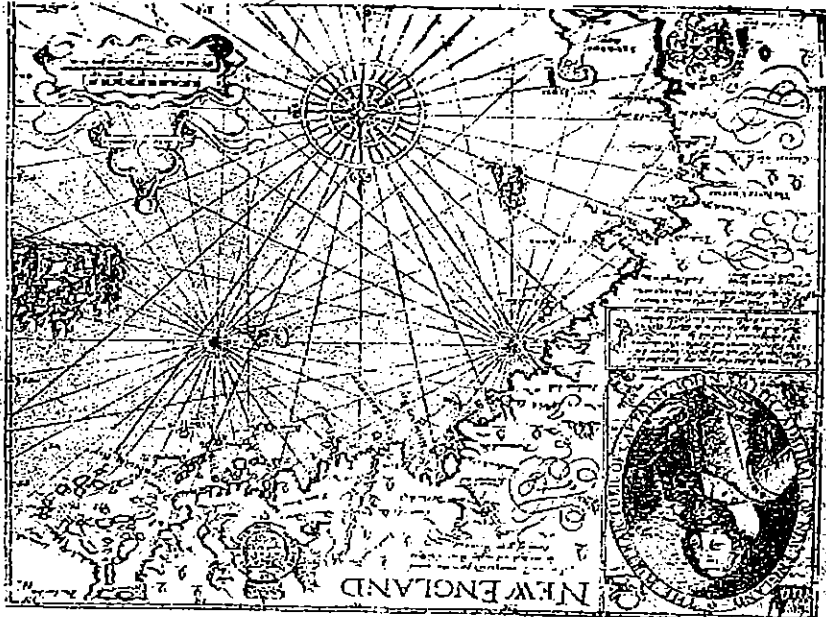
Their re-defined enterprise is to do God's work on earth, unceasingly, in remaking and reviving this world. They must erect a rejuvenated Jerusalem and not be deterred by existing tarnished edicts and customs. They had a covenant with God in which salvation has been granted to them without riders but with a clear obligation to live thereafter a principled and committed life.

### 1.3 THE NEW ENGLAND PURITANS AS THEY SAW THEMSELVES AND THEIR MISSION IN AMERICA

When Puritan John Winthrop's fleet led the Great Puritan Migration from England to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, it was in pursuit of a utopian goal: to found in the New World a utopia that would serve as an example to the Old World. They were not escaping from England, they were on an "errand into the wilderness." "For we must Consider," said Winthrop, who would later become the Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, "that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

For we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, see that if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. Therefore let us choose life: that we and our seede may live by obeying his voyce and cleaving to him, for hee is our life and our prosperitie.

—John Winthrop  
A Model of Christian Charity  
1630



Wintthrop's utopian goal, of course, was supremely unconcerned with those who already lived in America. North America was a vast continent occupied for many, many thousands of years by (according to recent estimates) perhaps ten to twelve million native Americans north of Rio Grande. How could the Puritans make a lasting bridgehead among so numerous a people? Already, in 1616, English fishermen visiting New England had brought the European disease bacilli which, assuming epidemic proportions, had annihilated probably half of the Indians of New England, who had numbered 25,000. "Their bones and skulls," an Englishman wrote, "made such a spectacle . . . it seemed to me a new found Golgotha."

Rather than regard this event as a tragic human disaster, the English in general looked upon it as a proof of God's wishes: that the land be made empty for them. And then came a second devastation, smallpox, shortly after the Puritans' arrival, which in the early 1630s killed thousands of more Indians. What had happened over the past century in Mexico, where a population of perhaps twenty-five million had shrunk to less than one-twelfth that number, was occurring around the Puritans as well.

The weakened local Indians therefore made room for the Puritans with not much resistance, and the Puritans in turn stated that since the land was not "occupied" or "claimed," it could be rightfully taken. Besides, the English said, they were a "civilized" people and the Indians "inclose no land, neither have any settled habitation, nor any tame Cattle to improve the Land by . . ." So the Puritans simply moved in and established their settlements. Later they made purchases of great tracts from the Indians, but only to establish a "legal" title to the land so that the Dutch of New Amsterdam (later New York City) could not.

There was much talk among the Puritans that they should Christianise the Indian, and small groups of "praying Indians" were eventually formed into villages nearby. But unlike the Spanish who came before them, the Puritans did not bring with them great armies of missionaries to spread out among the Indians, but only enough ministers to meet the Puritans' own needs. The authorities of Massachusetts Bay Colony declared that the Indians in their region were subject to the laws of the colony and tried to control their moral behaviour. This, however, quickly brought them into conflict with the Pequots, a strong and sturdy Indian tribe, and led them to the Pequot War of 1637, during which the tribe was almost obliterated. After that, for nearly forty years, there was peace. As earlier in Virginia, so now in New England, Indians and Puritans remained biologically separate, and more or less in their own separate enclaves.

## 1.4 THE EMERGENCE OF PURITANISM AS THE HEGEMONIC AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

The historian Francis Jennings has rightly written about the Puritan migration into America that the "so-called settlement of America was a resettlement, a reoccupation of a land made waste by the diseases and demoralisation introduced by the newcomers." The obliteration of the Old cultures of the New World by the new entrants from the Old World only partially explains however the emergence of Puritanism as the hegemonic American ideology.

The Puritans were extremely self-conscious emigrants who made a fetish of recording their experiences in the New World even as they were undergoing the experiences. John Winthrop was certainly not the only Puritan to write a journal noting in detail the day-to-day episodes of his adventures on alien shores. The ability to write, indeed, was supposed to be the mark of the civilisation of the European traveller. Correspondingly, (from the European point of view) the unlettered aborigines, the Indians, and slaves, the Africans brought in as chattel labour a little later, were either written down in or written out of the Puritan narratives.

Consider, for instance, the following account of a Puritan raid on a Pequot village, extracted from William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (written 1630-46; published, 1857):

Those that scaped the fire were slaine with the sword; some hewed to peeces, others rone throu' with their rapiers, so as they were quickly dispatched, and very few escaped. It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fyer, and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stincke and sente thereof, but the victory seemed a sweete sacrifice, and they gave the prayers thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to inclose their enemies in their hands, and give them so speedy a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy.

It is clear that Bradford applauds the slaying of the Indians despite his protestations about the sordidness of the event. The Puritan theologian Cotton Mather is much more candid than Governor Bradford in his approval of the genocide. "It was supposed that no less than 600 Pequot souls were brought down to hell that day."

Bradford's narrative is no ordinary piece of writing. Meant to be a memoir of his own American odyssey, this tract by the most illustrious of administrators of the colony of Plymouth transforms itself soon into cultural propaganda from contemporary New England.

Two motifs flow with each other through the text. The first motif is that America was utterly savage, in the state the Puritans encountered it. It was virtually uninhabitable and by extension uninhabited. The second is that whatever it was and whatever it was to become, America had nothing to do with Europe. America, in other words, was to become what the Puritans wished it to become.

Before the Puritans, writes Bradford, lay a wild landscape such as no civilized people had ever encountered, and "if they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they passed and [which] was now a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world." Not even the ship lying at anchor qualifies this absolute separation, for the captain daily threatens to leave. "May not and ought not the children of these fathers," Bradford instructs his first readers, who are just these children, rightly say: "Our fathers were Englishmen, which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their adversity." The Puritans are certainly in need of the Lord's support as their plight is worse than that of "the Apostle and his shipwrecked company" to whom "the barbarians showed . . . no small kindness in refreshing them." The savages the Puritans met "were readier to fill their sides full of arrows than otherwise." Bradford's chronicle distinguishes itself from other early American texts by featuring natives who are ferociously against the whites.

*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as Bradford's call to the children of the fathers makes explicit, consciously invents a historical tradition. To quote Myra Jehlen, "It proposes some fundamental terms for organizing the experience of colonisation." The most important of these terms are re-definitions of wilderness and civilization and the opposition between them. On the one hand, the wilderness is without trace of any cultivation. On the other hand, precisely in its untouched character, it is the site of a potentially exceptional construction. Simultaneously, civilization, in Bradford's account, acquires a strange ambiguity. The civilization left forever by the Puritans is suggestive of great accomplishments no doubt. But it is also an abode of destructive viciousness.

The final impression that Bradford's book leaves on the reader about the apparent polarities of civilization and wilderness is not one of contrast; the situations curiously resemble one another. They are like mirror images rather than like antithetical

emblems. When the Puritans step on to the New World to face its searing hospitality, they leave behind not an antithetical good but another kind of evil; and the complaint that there were no towns, inns, or houses in the New World measures their problem without advancing a solution. The solution is still to be engendered, and the rest of the book describes each undertaking, whether the building of accommodation or the enactment of laws, as from scratch.

All in all, the Puritan elite repeatedly asserted that their endeavour in founding America, inscribed in their numerous chronicles (such as Bradford's), coupled with the lack of any similarly scripted and detailed claims from other groups who inhabited America already during or before the Puritan arrival, made Puritanism emerge as the hegemonic American ideology.

### 1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I have tried to explain the circumstances under which the Puritans migrated from Europe to America and how, in the process, they created the context for the emergence of a "new" American culture and literature. Extracts from the writings of some eminent early Puritan migrants to the New World from the Old World, which are included in the Unit, indicate that the Puritans thought that they and they alone were the founders of American civilization notwithstanding the inhabitants of the territory before or after. Over the centuries, the Puritan view came to be accepted as the dominant view of American history.

### 1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Who were the first settlers from Europe in the American continent? What were their motives for trying to settle in America?
2. How were the Puritans different from the first European settlers in America? What were their reasons for emigration?
3. Why did Puritanism emerge as the hegemonic American ideology in the course of less than a century?

### 1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Robert, Kelley. *The Shaping of the American Past*, 1975.

Howard, Zinn. *A People's History of the United States*, 1980.

Milton, R. Stern & Seymour L. Gross, Ed. *American Literature Survey: Colonial and Federal. To 1800*, 1962.

J.A. Leo Lemay, *An Early American Reader*, 1988.

Perry, Miller, Ed. *The Puritans*, 1963.

-- *The New England Mind. The Seventeenth Century*, 1939.

Sacvan Bercovitch. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 1975.

In New England, individuals got land only from the village, and then only if they were members of that community. That is, they would be looked over first by members of the village leadership to see if they were goodly, if they were true Puritans. Then they would sign the covenant (common agreement) which the founders of the village had drawn up together at its founding. This covenant bound all people living in the town to "fear and reverence . . . Almighty God" and "profess and practice one truth . . . the foundation whereof is everlasting love."

Virginians settled as individuals upon the land they received from the Crown. New Englanders settled as communities upon land granted to each village by the General Court (the legislature) of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The historian Robert Kelley has astutely stated,

## 2.1 THE PURITAN TOWN AS A PROJECTED COMMUNAL UTOPIA

The aim of this Unit is to represent the structure of the Puritan town in New England as that of a projected communal utopia. The focus of study will be the Puritan elite's efforts to highlight the spirit of unanimity within the community in order to obscure the frictions and factions that frequently threatened to disrupt its unity. Various factors contributed towards the dissolution of the collective identity which the Puritans sought so assiduously to cultivate. Not the least of the factors was the emergence of trading interests which involved attempts to link the economy of the Puritan town with that of the world beyond. Gradually, new and manifold forces of dissent started to operate from the margins against a mainstream notion of Puritanism. The Unit will indicate the complex modes through which some of these forces succeeded eventually in diluting, if not destroying altogether, the utopian aspirations of the new England Puritans.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction: The Puritan town as a projected communal utopia.
- 2.2 Unanimity as the motif for an integrated community.
- 2.3 The emergence of trading interests as a factor undermining the unity within the Puritan settlements.
- 2.4 Puritans against themselves: the beginnings of dissent within the fold of Puritanism.
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings.

Structure

## UNIT 2 THE CONSOLIDATION AND DISPERSAL OF THE PURITAN UTOPIA

Each town (the term refers to a large piece of territory, not just to the village at its core) might be hundreds of thousands of acres in extent. The founding villages, however, turned their backs on that vast wilderness and formed compact village communities devoted to producing the perfect Christian life. All townspeople accepted the community's moral authority and discipline. According to the number of persons in each household, their social standing, and the "usefulness in either Church or Commonwealth" of their patriarch--Puritan life was profoundly rooted in male dominance. As echoed in the Old Testament--the town would grant so much pasture lands in the "commons," so many strips of arable farming land, and so much woodland. Everything was done communally. Just as each person's moral life was properly under the general observation of the overseeing group, so the cattle were grazed under the supervision of a common herdsman and what was planted in the fields was decided upon in common and ploughed and harvested in the same way.

New England towns were almost entirely self-governing. And no one in them had to pay quit-rents to any overlord for their lands (in contrast to the colonies in the south, where annual quit-rents had to be paid to the proprietors or to the Crown). Land, once granted to the individual farmers by the town, was theirs in fee simple: they owned it absolutely. The Puritans were determined never to reproduce in their part of America the ancient curse of tenant farming, which existed as the general rule in England--that is, the rule of manor lords who could raise rents and evict tenants at will. Just as Puritans wanted no bishops over their churches and their religious lives, they wanted no lords over their properties and their secular lives.

Several days a week the townspeople would gather in the meeting house to hear sermons from their minister. Each congregation was an independent community; there was no hierarchy that bound them together with other congregations. The basis of admission to any congregational community would be the ability of an individual to publicly, and in detail, describe the agony and the ecstasy of having gone through a salvation experience. Congregationalism, in short, was a "church of saints" built around a vision of Christian perfection. Visible faith and a visibly faithful way of living; these, it was said, were clearly the marks of God's grace in the saved person. Then, after grave inquiry, the "selectmen" who would govern the town were elected from the community. It was assumed that henceforth these individuals ultimately answered only to God.

## 2.2 UNANIMITY AS THE MOTIF FOR AN INTEGRATED COMMUNITY

The Puritan village, wherever located, was defined by an enthusiasm for unity, order and peace. New England was not founded, as is a popular misconception, as a democracy in the modern sense. People were supposed to talk together and argue things out in the town meeting house, but when decisions were made, all were to assent unanimously. In practice, Puritans accepted that certain individuals were more substantial and authoritative than others, and the board of selectmen elected from this elite was generally presumed to exercise a divine magistracy that should be obeyed dutifully. Indeed, Puritans generally disliked what we would call democracy, which implies free and open criticism of leaders and the organisation of opposition to depose them. This was seen as running against the oneness desired by God, and being disruptive of harmony. The idea of dissension, or a kind of "party politics" within the village community, was beyond grasping, or accepting, as right. Were they not people of one God? Was there not one truth in all things? Unanimity - this was what New Englanders aimed for and prized. Anarchy and chaos were feared.

What did New Englanders think about the relationship between state and church? On the one hand they rejected the idea that church and state should be unified in the sense that they should be interwoven. Back home in Old England, the Church of

England shared in the making of laws (its bishops sat, and still sit, in the House of Lords), and it had a court system that could punish people by even incarceration for moral offences. The Puritans wanted none of this, and they gave their ministers no such function or powers. However, Puritans were not what were then termed "separatists"—radicals who demanded an absolute separation of state and church. Rather, they believed that in a given country there should be a single state church supported by public taxes to which all citizens of the country should belong. We must remember, once more, that the Puritans believed deeply in unanimity, in the whole community thinking and acting in unison in every respect.

## 2.3 THE EMERGENCE OF TRADING INTERESTS AS A FACTOR UNDERMINING THE UNITY WITHIN THE PURITAN SETTLEMENTS

The immediate task in New England was to find an economic basis for the new community. The money that emigrating Puritans brought with them sustained Massachusetts through its early years. Meanwhile, a frantic search for furs was under way. By 1640 this search had pushed settlements out to Connecticut, south along Long Island, and north to the Merrimac River. However, the supply of furs in New England was limited. By 1660 the trade had dropped off steeply; by 1675 it was virtually extinct. Worse yet, the outbreak of civil war in England in 1642 reduced immigration to a trickle, and with it the flow of money from England. Thereafter, Massachusetts entered extremely difficult times.

A lasting source of income was found in the rich fishing waters that lay off the coasts of northern New England and Newfoundland. Steeped in minerals and nutrients, the mix of cold Arctic waters and the Gulf Stream in this region generated a huge fish population and therefore fertile fisheries. These waters had provided fish to French and Portuguese traders for generations, but after 1640 New Englanders moved in so vigorously that within twenty years they dominated the trade. The codfish became the Massachusetts symbol, for it provided the basis for a healthy New England economy.

The consequence was the emergence of an extensive and elaborate trading system in the Atlantic. Based upon fish, lumber products, rum, wine, tobacco, English manufactured goods, and eventually slaves, it touched England, West Africa, the Caribbean Islands, the Southern colonies in America and New England. Through this trade, New England became closely embroiled in the slave traffic. In 1643 the first New England vessel carried a cargo of black slaves to the plantations.

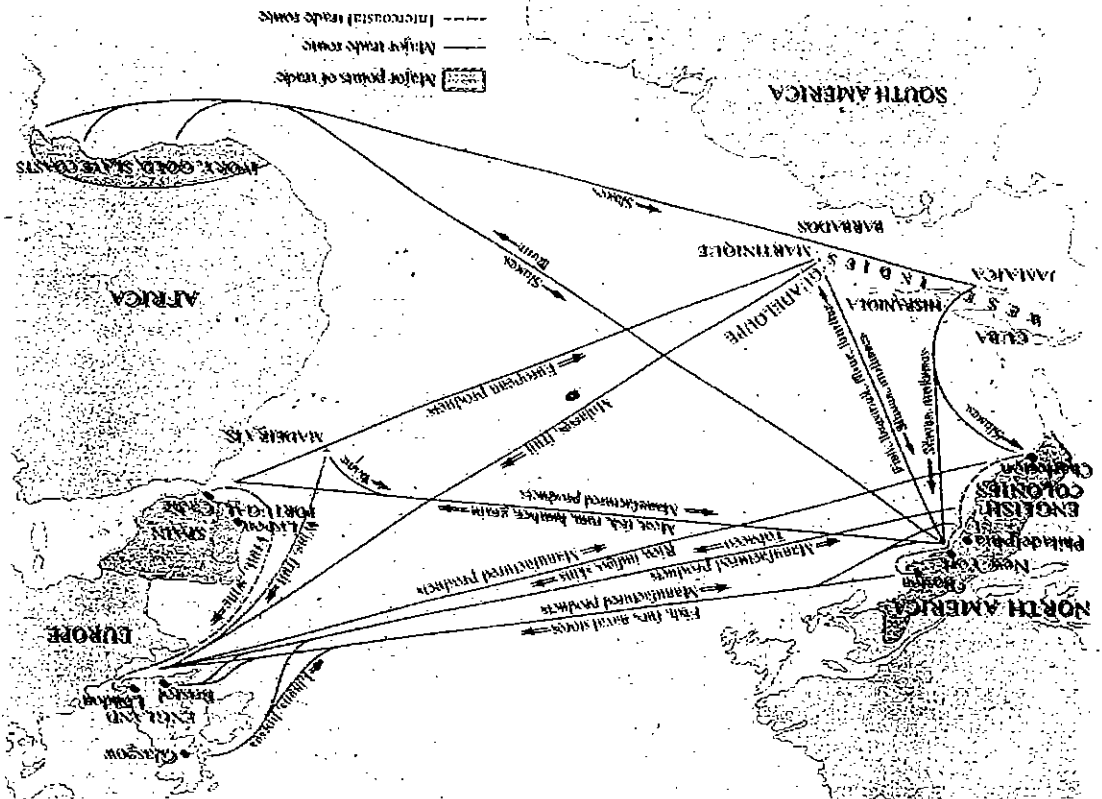
As this intricate new trading network emerged, an ascendant class, the merchants arose in Massachusetts. The Puritan authorities were not traders, but were usually drawn from the lesser rural gentry in England. They were firmly moored to the traditional medieval conception that business activities should be engineered so as to benefit the general community and not just particular individuals.

Controversy soon broke out in Massachusetts over whether merchants could raise the price of goods when the demands of the market allowed them to do so. The medieval injunction, issued at a time of stable prices, was that every article has a "just" tag. Higher rates were nothing but exploitation of the buyer. Robert Keayne, a Boston merchant, who insisted on selling imported goods at higher prices than those decreed by the General Court, was tried and fined for his offence. As trade enlarged, these early troubles evolved into a continuing intestine conflict between the Puritan authorities, backed by the rural villagers all over Massachusetts, and the increasingly assertive and aggressive merchants of Boston. The merchants had emigrated directly from the crowded business districts of London. They knew each other intimately,



By 1660 New England's merchants were trading freely all over the Atlantic with France, Spain and Holland, among other countries. After the Restoration of monarchy, Charles II's government moved vigorously to pull the New England merchants back into line and to tighten the reins on the empire. In the Navigation Acts, the royal authorities required that most colonial trade be channeled through England. These regulations brought loud complaints, but London was determined. Simultaneously, New England merchants began trooping to Whitehall, headquarters of government in London, to complain of the harsh restrictions imposed on them by the Puritan authorities in New England. They pointed to laws against the residence of "strangers" and the requirement of a salvation experience as the basis for admission to the community. Few merchants were "saved." Many, indeed, had converted to Anglicanism, especially since Anglicans were back in power in England. Moved by their complaints, London began in 1665 the first of several investigations into the problems of New England. To the royal authorities, Puritans were hardly objects of sympathy. As suspected partisans to the anti-royalist revolution in England which had been responsible for the execution of Charles I, they were treated almost as traitors to the homeland. Thus, in 1684, not surprisingly, the English Crown came out openly in favour of the anti-Puritan forces and pronounced Massachusetts a royal colony.

Atlantic trade routes



intermarried extensively, and shared the business values of an increasingly individualistic age. They soon became men of importance in New England, for they exported iron goods, cloth and other vitally necessary manufactured goods of England. Suave and articulate, tending to be always on the side of social mobility and religious tolerance, they introduced into New England life an influence Puritans regarded with alarm. Many of them wore foppish London dresses, which to Puritan eyes was scandalously sinful.

The Consolidation and Dispersal of the Puritan Utopia

From then on, the governor of Massachusetts was not elected locally from the Puritan gentry, but almost invariably chosen in London from among English politicians. The governor administered the colony in company with the powerful upper house of the legislature, the Council, which was composed of the various officials of the Massachusetts government, themselves appointed by the governor. They were often chosen from the merchant class, now completely victorious over the Puritans. At the same period, an Anglican church was opened in Boston and all discrimination against Anglicans were removed. The Bible Commonwealth had finally been undermined.

## 2.4 THE PURITANS AGAINST THEMSELVES: THE BEGINNINGS OF DISSENT WITHIN THE FOLD OF PURITANISM

Dissensions within the Puritan fold were in part responsible for hastening the end of the projected Puritan utopia in New England.

In 1631, Roger Williams had arrived in Boston to be a minister. He was soon preaching that no church (not even New England's Congregational Church) should be supported by general taxation, nor should everyone be required to attend it. Inevitably, he had to leave, and in 1636 he founded his own colony, Rhode Island. Here he created a unique community in which there was complete freedom of conscience and genuine democracy of institutions. Williams believed that only people's actions, and not their thoughts, should be supervised by government, and then only if they led to the harm of others. If they wished to gather together and form churches, these should be totally self-supporting and not connected to the state. That is, the gathered worshippers should be "Baptist"-and Baptist Protestantism in America has its origins in Roger Williams's Rhode Island. Gradually, Rhode Island attracted discontented religious individualists from all over New England. Puritans regarded it with distaste, for Rhode Island seemed to emblemize a licentiousness and a lasciviousness that they found hard to accept.

The secular heterodoxy represented by Anne Hutchinson, however, was even more startling. Born in 1591, Anne immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634, when she and her husband joined the Puritan minister John Colton and his followers in the fledgling colony. In New England, the outspoken Anne, who had been deeply influenced by her father, a preacher imprisoned several times for his opposition to the Established Church, quickly ran afoul of the colony's basic distrust of women. When she realised that women were to be excluded from colonial affairs, she began holding meetings for women to discuss both religious and secular matters. Her strongly expressed belief in the individual soon attracted the merchants of the colony, who also chafed under the authoritarianism of the Puritan regime, clerical as much as lay. Anne and her acolytes consistently came into confrontation with the authorities--opposing wars with the Indians, fighting against the concept of Eve-induced Original Sin, upholding the separation between church and state. By 1637, Anne had a larger appeal than Governor John Winthrop. Brought to trial for her dissenting views, she found a forum to address the entire colony, England--and posterity. During the trial she was labelled a witch, a Jezebel, and compared to "the lustful Eve." Convicted, she was banished from the colony and finally--ironically--murdered in exile by Indians.

## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I have tried to highlight the structure of the Puritan town in New England as that of a projected communal utopia. This utopian projection is seen as an attempt

Same as for Unit 1.

**2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS**

1. Describe the structure of the Puritan town in New England as that of a projected communal utopia.
2. How did the emergence of trading interests undermine the unity within the Puritan settlements.
3. Discuss the cases of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson as types of dissent emerging against the hegemonic interpretation of Puritanism in New England.

**2.6 QUESTIONS**

on the part of the Puritan elite to gloss over differences and dissensions that existed within their community. A major factor of disruption of the integrity of the Puritan community stemmed out of the community's opening up to trading interests and thereby inevitably to the world outside itself. Slowly but steadily, this induced divisive elements to assert themselves against a hegemonic interpretation of Puritanism. An account of these elements which ultimately dispersed the Puritan consolidation is also provided in this Unit.

The Consolidation and  
Dispersal of the Puritan  
Utopia

This is not to say that the writer was always devoid of literary sensibility. Puritans saw expressions of divine imagination in the world around them, and drew analogies between the beautiful objects and the perfect archetype which they conceived as existing in the mind of God. Beauty was supposed to be the order and harmony which God established, and literature useful only insofar as the perusal of it might shape human spirit to a better understanding of the divine metaphysics. Literature, thus, did not deserve more than incidental attention in the Puritan arrangement of things.

In each instance the comments are somehow concerned with the question: How can prose or verse be made serviceable to the preacher, historian or pedagogue? Usually the answers are related to the fulfillment of some far-reaching end. The motive behind Puritan authorship was inevitably utilitarian: the writer might chronicle the story of his age, narrate the lives of famous personages, arrange unwellcome schools of thought, discourse upon human duties or compose hymn praises to God, but the end he intended was never merely an enjoyment of belles-lettres or of literature for its own sake.

Therefore the Puritans rarely expressed themselves cohesively and coherently as a group in their appreciation of literature. Nevertheless, they have individually left on record a substantial number of short comments on the art of writing as well as a few long essays.

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION: PURITAN THEORY OF LITERATURE

In this Unit I shall describe the Puritan theory of literature insofar as such a theory exists and is to be extrapolated out of the literary practices of the Puritans. In the analysis of the literary practices of the Puritans, you must pay special attention to the choice of literary style and literary genres. An attempt will be made to demonstrate how the literature of the Puritans, some of it at least, effectively distances itself from, if not actually destabilizes, Puritan ideology.

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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|-----|--|
| 3.0 | Objectives   |
| 3.1 | Introduction: Puritan theory of literature   |
| 3.2 | The literary style of the Puritans   |
| 3.3 | The literary genres of the Puritans  |
| 3.4 | Puritan literature versus Puritan ideology, or how Puritan ideology is sometimes subverted by Puritan literature |
| 3.5 | Let Us Sum Up  |
| 3.6 | Questions  |
| 3.7 | Suggested Readings.  |

Structure

## UNIT 3 THE PURITANS AS LITERARY ARTISTS

The literature of the Puritans was meant not to be self-foregrounding or self-glorificatory. Even before New England was founded, the Puritans had advocated a literary style that was simple, lucid and controlled, fit to satisfy the intellect, not excite the passions, to instruct not to titillate. "Painful" Perkins, fellow of Christ College, Cambridge, was a Puritan whose evangelical fervour made him one of the most influential leaders of New England and thoughts. He had written, in a manual on sermonising that was the recognised authority in New England, that "the Minister may, and yea must, privately use at his libertie the arts, philosophy, and variety of reading, whilst he is in framing the sermon: but he ought in publike to conceal all these from the people. . . ." Thomas Hooker warned of such readers as might find the manner of his discourse "too Logical, or Scholasticall, in regard of the terms" he used

That plainesse and perspicuity, both for matter and manner of expression, are the things that I have conscientiously indeavoured in the whole debate: for I have ever thought writings that come abroad, they are not so dazle, but direct the apprehension of the meanest, and I have accounted it the chiefeest part of judicious learning, to make a hard point easy and familiar in explication.

Although Puritans aspired towards a deliberate spartanness of style, it would be a mistake to think that this style was necessarily insipid and placid. The audience aided the minister to maintain an interesting style, for the Puritan laity esteemed that preaching creditable whereby the clergyman engaged their enthusiasm without resorting to ornate and elaborated diction. The ministers too were wise enough to realise that arid and dull sermons would not hold the respect of an educated flock, nor did they want that the uneducated among their people should be allowed to respect a shipshod oration. One of the greatest preachers in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, Richard Sibbes, whose works were widely read in New England, enunciated one part of the Puritan theory of style in writing the preface for a fellow Puritan's book:

. . . But because the way to come to the heart is often to pass through the fancy, therefore this godly man studied by lively representations to help men's faith by the fancy. It was our Saviour Christ's manner of teaching to express heavenly things in an earthly manner; and it was the study of the wise man, Solomon, becoming a preacher, to find out pleasant words, or words of delight.

Sibbes here reveals that the source for much that is inspirational in Puritan writing was the Bible—the model which justified an indulgence in figures of speech even though plainness and perspicuity were being elevated at the expense of flourish and finish.

However, had the Puritan style derived exclusively from Biblical models, it would have lacked the analytical expositions and the articulate explanations which happen at Harvard and Yale down to the middle of the eighteenth century. Ames defended the non-ostentatious style of the Puritan preachers, and his example influenced almost every sermon delivered in New England:

The driness of the style, and harshnesse of some words will be much blamed by the same persons [as those who object to the cause-and-effect framework]. But I doe prefer to exercise myself in that heresie, that when it is my purpose to Teache, I thinke I should not say that in two words which may be said in one, and that that key is to be chosen which doth open best, although it be of wood, if there be not a golden key of the same efficacy.

But economy of words was not to imply insufficient communication; the spartan style was not proposed to become a boring style. As Ames instructed his students on another page:

... the Word of the Lord is a two-edged sword, that pierceeth into the inward thoughts and affections, and goeth through unto the joyning together of the bones and marrow. Preaching therefore ought not to be dead, but lively and effectual, so that an unbeliever coming into the Congregation of the faithful he ought to be affected, and as it were digged through with the very hearing of the Word, that he may give glory to God.

### 3.3 THE LITERARY GENRES OF THE PURITANS

The non-ostentatious style of the Puritans was not confined to their pulpit discourses or devotional pacans alone. Historians from William Bradford (first generation Puritan immigrant) to Cotton Mather (third generation Puritan immigrant) brought out narratives about their lives and times with the express purpose of reaching out to every ready reader.

Chronicles, intertwining the individual and the collective experiences of the Puritans in New England were written by the dozen through the seventeenth century. The Puritans did not distinguish between the public and the private domains of experience. For them, the church represented the body of Christ, with each member such an integral part that if one person were in distress the entire body writhed. Conversely, if the spiritual community was troubled, each person was afflicted. The single subject's striving towards salvation became an objective community mission, serving as an indication of the condition of the congregation just as the condition of the congregation was reflected in each member. With the extensive interdependence of personal and community history, stable times ensured not only personal assurance but also community assertion against traitors and aliens. But unstable times

engendered community as well as personal self-castigation; in days of darkness the flock would delve into the depths of their souls to understand the source of God's anger and explain their plight through harsh scrutinies of each other's spiritual lapses. Once even a single sinner entered the holy order, the order remained in danger of disintegration. The community must stand together to defeat the threat, as in the instances of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams or at Salem in 1692.

A remarkable account of the encounter with evil is in The Diary of the eminent minister Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705). Born in Yorkshire, England, in 1631, Wigglesworth moved with his parents to New England in 1638 and settled in New Haven. A brilliant student, he studied with the famous schoolmaster Ezekiel Cheever and was writing tracts in Latin by the age of nine. After an interruption in his education consequent upon his father's five-year illness, he went to Harvard where he studied theology as well as physiology, finished first in his class, obtained all A.B. and an A.M., and remained as a tutor until 1654. In 1655 he married his cousin Mary Reyner, and in 1656 he was ordained as the minister of the church at Malden. Then he entered an excruciating period of painful illness that so weakened him that he could not perform his clerical chores. In 1659, when Mary died, Wigglesworth's debilitation deepened. He declined the presidency of Harvard because he did not think his "bodily health and strength competent to undertake . . . such a weighty work."

In 1686, however, Wigglesworth experienced a remarkable rejuvenation. he resumed his duties in Malden, but shocked the community by marrying his housekeeper, Martha Mudge, who was twenty-five years younger than he and not a member of his church. But, as the marriage endured and reared six children, Wigglesworth ultimately regained the respect of his congregation and of the greater Puritan

Wiglesworth's Diary for the years 1653 and 1657 documents his youthful fears of damnation brought on by nocturnal emissions, sexual desire, and masturbation, and his guilt feelings over his anger toward his father, especially about his inability to feel sorrow over his father's death. Wiglesworth's Diary is filled with the kind of statements that have given the Puritans a reputation for obsessive gloom.

"Innumerable evils compass me about, and prevail against me, wherefore I am afraid and ashamed and unable to see God still loving me with an everlasting love. I find so much of my spirit to go out unto the creative, unto mirth, that there is little savour of God left in my soul." His accounts of his interactions with his students suggests that "mirth" was probably fairly rare in Wiglesworth's life. "I set myself this day to wrestle with the Lord for myself and then for my pupils . . . but still I see the Lord shutting out my prayers . . . for he whom in special I prayed for, I heard in the evening with ill company playing musick, though I had solemnly warned him but yesterday of letting his spirit go after pleasures." The lamentations of Puritan diaries sometimes appear forced and formulaic, but the specificity of Wiglesworth's sorrowing to quote Emory Elliot, "gives convincing evidence of mental anguish."

The *Autobiography of Increase Mather* is more objective than the Wiglesworth Diary, but it too makes clear that even those who had the strongest reasons to expect sanctification experienced periodic incertitude throughout life. Often called the "foremost American Puritan," Increase was the son of the first-generation minister Richard Mather. He graduated from Harvard in 1656, completed a master's degree at Trinity College, Dublin, married the daughter of John Cotton, and was pastor of Old North Church, Boston, for almost sixty years. A prolific author, he published over a hundred works, including histories, sermons, tracts, treatises and a biography of his father. The most eminent minister in New England from about 1670 to the early 1700s, Mather socialised with the highest government officials and the wealthiest merchants. From 1685 to 1701, he served as president of Harvard, which he served through severe legal and financial crises. In 1688, he was chosen for a mission to England to entreat James II to restore the charter, and when William and Mary became the new sovereigns in 1689, Mather negotiated a new charter with them. Although he probably obtained as much for Massachusetts as was possible in that context, some criticized him for yielding too much and for using his political position to help his friends, especially his nominee for governor, Sir William Phelps. After Phelps' mediocre administration, Mather became embroiled in nasty political battles and suffered a decline of influence until his death in 1723.

Over the course of his life, Mather kept a diary, but in 1685 he decided to compose a formal autobiography from his many diary volumes. Writing for his children with no intention of publishing, he declared his purpose was to show them how his faith had been sustained through trials and tribulations. One of the most interesting features of this work is the way in which the idea of God's covenant with an individual developed, at least in Mather's mind, to a two-sided agreement in which God had certain obligations. At a low point in his youth, when he was awaiting both his temporal calling to his ministry and his eternal calling to grace, he wrote that "the Lord broke in upon my conscience with very terrible convictions and awakenings . . . I was in the extremity of anguish and horror in my soul." Unable to bear the torture, Mather actually dared to threaten God "that if He should not answer me graciously, others after my decease, that should see the papers which I had written, which I kept as remembrances of my talking before God would be discouraged."

Dilemmas, such as are expressed peripherally in the histories of Mather and Wiglesworth, are central to the poetry of the Puritans. The term "Puritan poetry" itself is somewhat of an oxymoron. In England, during the sixteenth century, Puritan radicals had warned that the senses were unreliable, that appeals to the imagination were dangerous, and that the use of imagistic, figurative, or symbolic language

bordered upon idolatry. Reasoning that God had inscribed all the truth that humanity needed in the scriptures, they held that plain and direct discussion of His word was the only truly legitimate and temperate mode of verbal expression. The Catholics' and the Anglicans' use of graven images, emphasis on pulpit paean, appeals to congregations through music, and ornate vestments were further proof to the Puritans that artistry invited idolatry. The Puritans' iconoclastic destruction of religious statuary during the Civil War, their closing of the theatres, the plainness of their churches, and their official statements condemning ornate dress and speech strongly support a view that "Puritan poetry" was all but impossible.

Yet, from the 1940s through the 1960s, scholars continued to discover and exhibit innumerable Puritan poems, many of which contain provocatively striking decorative language and allusions not only to the Bible but also to classical models such as Ovid, Cicero, Virgil, Horace and Livy. Numerous poems also contain intertextual references to the work of contemporary poets, among them Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Herbert, Vaughan and Quarles. Such evidence of an apparent gap between Puritan theory and Puritan practice in the realm of poetry continues to appear.

### EMINENT PURITANS



Cotton Mather

Courtesy: American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.



Judge Samuel Sewall (left) helped to burn witches, made public repentance, and wrote a chatty diary.

Photo by George M. Corliss, Jr. Courtesy: Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.





John Winthrop, first governor under the Charter.



Rev. Richard Mather  
Wood engraving by John Foster.



William Pynchon  
Engraving. Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

It is important to remember that the Puritans who emigrated to New England had been, after all, heirs to a rich literary tradition, and many must have cherished the beauty of the language and the literature in spite of religious scruples. Eventually the ministers expanded their doctrines or discovered various intricacies in them that allowed an increase in the quantity and quality of artistic creations. By 1650, a major shift had become evident authorising writers to use sensual imagery more freely and even to strive consciously for stylization. A notable sign of this change was the revised translation of The Bay Psalm Book undertaken in 1651 by President Henry Dunster of Harvard and Richard Lyon, who said they had "a special eye" for "the sweetness of the verse." Cotton Mather later said of this edition that "it was thought that a little more of Art was to be employed upon the verses."

The movement toward verbal artistry received its strongest official endorsement from the eminent English Puritan Richard Baxter (1615-91) in his highly popular *Saints Everlasting Rest* (1650). A military chaplain in the Puritan Army during the Civil War and a respected antipapist, Baxter could be trusted to deal safely with such sensitive issues such as the use of the senses, imagination and imagery in the poetic processes. Intended primarily as a handbook for tracking the stages of the saint's spiritual journey, Baxter's work also had important implications for legitimising literary invention because he endorsed appeals to the imagination. Baxter argued that God gave humanity a plastic language in order to enhance people's abilities to perceive his truths. Highlighting the many uses of images in the Bible, he proposed that "these with most other descriptions of our Glory are expressed as if it were the very flesh and sense, which though they were all improper and figurative, yet doubtless if such expressions had not been best, and to us necessary, the Holy Ghost would not have so frequently used them." Therefore, enjoins Baxter, people are obliged to use this God-given system and to take delight in the world of objects, which is itself an image, a text of God's instruction

The other developing component of Puritan thought that served to certify a Puritan poetics was the more liberal employment of biblical typology. The routine clerical explanations of the Old Testament types in the New Testament antitypes had established a mode of symbolic expression. In the early decades of the settlements, some clergy warned against the extension of this hermeneutic method, but, gradually the creative impulses of the Puritan ministers and the inviting vision of New England as New Jerusalem led to a most liberal use of typology. Opening the system towards more elaborate constructs engaging biblical types as well as historical events, moral formulations, and even the characters of well-known individuals. Present-day re-appraisals of Puritan poetry have served to reconfigure conceptions of Puritan poetics. With a new awareness that it was very possible for a Puritan poet to

strive intentionally for artfulness, readers have been less inclined to dismiss newly discovered productions and more open to recognizing aesthetic achievement.

If Puritan poetry projected the dilemmas of individual Puritans in the process of adhering to their faith, this crisis of faith was addressed in a different way by the Puritan ministers in the sermons that they delivered to the collective group or the flock. Now known as the Puritan jeremiads, these sermons selected their texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah, and reinscribed a rhetorical formula that included recalling the courage and piety of the founders, lamenting recent and current ills, and crying out for a return to the original commitment and conviction. In current scholarship, the term "jeremiad" has expanded to include not only sermons but also other texts that rehearse the familiar tropes of the formula such as letters, covenant renewals, as well as confessions.

The specific circumstance in which the jeremiad emerged as a literary genre was a series of traumas that afflicted the Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1660 and 1690. These included impersonal disasters such as fires, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and the appearance of comets and human mishaps such as renewed fighting with the Indians, growing materialism, increasing occurrences of dissent from within the ranks and a general decline of the religious spirit.

Whether an actual decline of religious zeal among the Puritans in these decades did happen remains one of the most debated issues in Puritan scholarship. Church membership records suggest that the decline in membership may have been a myth born of the jeremiad ritual and the compulsion to place blame for what seemed otherwise to be inexplicable calamities. Yet a shared perception of moral deterioration accrued social and political force and inspired many of the colony's most interesting literary texts, and indeed, the trope of decline became central to later Puritan expressions.

Overall, the jeremiads had a complicated, seemingly contradictory, communal function. On the one hand, they were designed to awaken a lethargic people. On the other hand, in their repetitive and ritualistic nature, they functioned as a form of reassurance, reinscribing proof that the Puritans were still a united denomination who ruled New England in covenant with God and under his sometimes chastising and yet ultimately protective hand. The tension between these competing, yet finally reconciled, purposes gives the jeremiads their literary richness.

The most striking instance of this genre is Samuel Danforth's (1626-1674) *A Brief Record of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*, which was preached in 1670 and published the following year. Born in Frammingham, Suffolk, England, Danforth had lost his mother when he was three and came with his father to New England in 1634, when he was eight. He graduated from Harvard in 1643 and accepted a post as minister in Roxbury in 1650, where he served with John Eliot, whose missionary work among the Indians left Danforth to perform the major responsibilities of the parish. In 1651, Danforth married Mary Wilson of Boston, and they had twelve children, several of whom died young.

Although he took his text for his famous jeremiad from Mathew 11:7-9 and not Jeremiah or Isaiah, Danforth announced in his preface that his theme was the "loss of first love . . . being a radical disease too tremendously growing upon us," and he declared the "observation of that declension [was] justly calling for so meet an antidote." From a literary perspective, Danforth's project is particularly notable for its imaginative evocation of wilderness imagery and its incorporation, in the final pages, of a dramatic dialogue between Danforth and a community of fearful listeners. The text thus can be read as resonant with Christ's ironic dialogue with followers of John the Baptist upon John's return from the desert where he began his ministry. The Doctrine that Danforth draws from the text forms a typological connection between John and the Puritan founders: both are such as have sometimes left their pleasant

cities and habitations to enjoy the pure worship of God in a wilderness. Like those who followed John and eventually lost interest in his preaching, some Puritans "are apt in time to abate and cool in their affection." At which point, "the Lord calls upon them seriously and thoroughly to examine themselves, which it was that drew them into the wilderness."

The 1670s through the 1680s witnessed preachers using election days, fast days, funerals, executions, and any special events to perform the jeremiad ritual, and more often than not the emergent generation was the target. Increase Mather proved masterful in his exploitation of the genre, and with four such sermons each, he and his son Cotton preached more election sermons than any other ministers. In addition to his classic *Day of Trouble is Near* (1674), Increase's jeremiads included: *A Renewal of Covenant the Great Duty Incumbent on Decaying and Distressed Churches* (1677), *Pray for the Rising Generation* (1678), and *A Call from Heaven to the Present and Succeeding Generations* (1679). A few other titles of famous jeremiads convey a sense of the consistency of the theme: William Adams's *The Necessity of Pouring Out of the Spirit from on High Upon a Sinning Apostatizing People* (1679), Samuel Hooker's *Righeousness Regained From Heaven* (1677), Urian Oake's *New England Pleaded With* (1673), Thomas Sheppard Jr's *Eye-Salve, or a Watch-Word... To Take Heed of Apostasy* (1673), Jonathan Mitchell's *Nehemiah on the Wall in Troubled Times* (1671), and Thomas Wallley's *Balm in Gilead to Heal Zion's Wounds* (1669).

Whether the clergy continued to preach jeremiads after the 1680s is not certain, but certain it is that fewer such sermons were printed in the eighteenth century. The sermons that were published were on the whole more encouraging and cheerful, less engrossed by the fall of moral standards and thus not quite quintessentially Puritan.

### 3.4 PURITANS LITERATURE VERSUS PURITAN IDEOLOGY, OR HOW PURITAN IDEOLOGY IS SOMETIMES SUBVERTED BY PURITAN LITERATURE

Curiously, the quintessentially Puritan author of the seventeenth century too had sometimes scripted texts that militated against the ideology of the Puritans. Two instances of such subversive authorship ought to suffice to prove this point. Anne Bradstreet, born in Northampton, England, was the daughter of Thomas Dudley, steward of the learned Puritan, the Earl of Lincoln. Brought up in aristocratic surroundings, she was given an education unusual for women at the period and enjoyed the resources of the Earl of Lincoln's magnificent library at Sempringham Castle. When she was sixteen, she married Simon Bradstreet, a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, steward of the Countess of Warwick and, in a small way, protege of Thomas Dudley. When she was eighteen, Anne, Simon and her parents sailed with John Winthrop aboard the *Arabella* for Massachusetts Bay, where both her husband and her father later became governors. An exemplary wife, house-keeper and mother of eight children, she was nevertheless a precursor of the "emancipated woman" of modern days because she could not fully reconcile herself to a life completely limited by children, kitchen and church. Apparently every minute she could do so she devoted to writing verses, letters, and diary notes. In these she not only showed her strength of character and her passionate love for her husband and children, but also her learning and her uneasiness about being unable to submit as constantly and dutifully as a good Puritan matron should to a total acceptance of the orthodox beliefs of her sect.

Her first book was taken in manuscript to London by John Woodbridge, a relative. In 1650 it was published in England under a title not of Mrs. Bradstreet's choosing: *The*

*Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America. Or, several Poems, compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning, Full of Delight. . . . By a Gentlewoman in those Parts.* The poems were attempts to versify not only her moral and religious sentiments but also contemporary scientific ideas, and they reflected the psychology, physiology, physics, natural sciences, and "correspondences" of the Renaissance. Published as "Quaternions," the poems included the "The Four Elements," "The Four Ages of Man," "The Four Humours in Man's Constitution," "The Four Seasons of the Year" and "The Four Monarchies." As intellectual exercises, they speak of the influence of Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, Plutarch, Usher, Francis Quarles' *Emblems*, the Bible, and most particularly the Sylvestre translation of *La Sermaine* by Guillaume du Bartas.

Comparatively little is known about the early years of Edward Taylor, America's greatest colonial poet. He was born in Leicestershire, England, either in Coventry or Sketehley, probably in 1645, and probably to a dissenting family. In any case, British universities were not hospitable to young Puritans during the persecutions of the 1660s; furthermore the loyalty oaths in favour of the monarchy required after the Restoration were repugnant to a man of Taylor's persuasions. Thus armed with letters of introduction to the influential Increase Mather, second generation New England minister, and the moneyed John Hull, Taylor arrived in Boston, in July 1668, a refugee in search of formal education. Subsequently he went to Harvard, where he earned distinctions and became a close friend of Samuel Sewall! He was graduated in 1671 and accepted a call to the ministry at Westfield, Massachusetts. There he spent the remaining fifty-eight years of his life as a physician and a passionate, engaging and brilliant pastor. He was married twice, had thirteen children, was honoured with a Master's degree by Harvard in 1720. This is about all that is known about the private life of Edward Taylor.

As far as his public life is concerned, of course, there is the remarkable manuscript book of poetry he produced. Although it is a mistake to think that the ecstasy expressed in his poems was not representative of Puritan piety, Taylor's occasional Pelagianism and "enthusiasm." Much later, his grandson, President Ezra Stiles of Yale, presented the manuscripts to the Yale library in 1783. In 1937, Thomas H. Johnson announced the discovery of this hitherto obscure exemplar of colonial literature in an article published in the *New England Quarterly*. In 1939 Johnson published selections from the manuscripts in the form of a compilation. The basic groupings of the manuscript book are "God's Determinations," which in highly unorthodox fashion celebrates the primacy of divine mercy rather than justice for man caught in the continuing war between Christ and Satan; "Five Poems," and "Sacramental Meditations," which expresses a fervent yearning for an expectation of ecstasy in acceptance by Christ.

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I have tried to outline the Puritan theory of literature insofar as such a theory exists and is to be extrapolated out of the literary practices of the Puritans. Special attention has been accorded to the Puritans' selection of literary styles and literary genres. Instances of how the 'literary' often militates against the 'ideological' in the realm of Puritan writing receives special concentration in this Unit.

### 3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Outline some of the outstanding tenets of the literary theory of the Puritans.

- 2. Comment on how the Puritans' selection of literary styles and literary genres abides by the tenets of their literary theory.
- 3. Give instances of how Puritan literature might militate against Puritan ideology.

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### 3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Same as for Unit 1, and

Marcus Cunliffe. Ed. *American Literature to 1900 (The Penguin History of Literature)*. 1973.

Sacvan Bercovitch. Ed. *The Cambridge History of American Literature Volume One: 1590-1820*. 1994.

A.N. Kaul, *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 1963.

Sacvan Bercovitch. Ed. *The American Puritan Imagination: Essays in Reevaluation*. 1974.

Sacvan Bercovitch, Ed. *Typology and Early American Literature*, 1972.

By the turbulent 1680s, in the aftermath of the republican experiment and before the Glorious Revolution, England and its empire were in the throes of numerous controversies over constitutional liberties and autocratic power. Against this backdrop arose a sect of Christians, inspired by a man named George Fox, who had turned away from every established church, Catholic, Anglican and Puritan in search of the true road to God. These were the Quakers.

The Quakers believed that divine guidance was not to be found in any outward church, or even in the Bible (though the latter was of course central to all faith). It was to be found in the voice of conscience, which is God's voice. Neither rituals nor clergy were needed. Even taking the sacraments in church was unnecessary. One's whole life was instead to be a continuing baptism, in the sense of resisting sensual evils, and a continuing communion, in the sense of a union with Christ.

The purpose of a religious gathering, what the Quakers called a meeting, was to commune jointly, in silence, with the indwelling spirit. If a member felt called upon to rise and speak, he was to do so freely and without concern for his lack of clerical training. The Quakers were distrustful of learning, for they felt it led to the sin of pride in self. True preaching came not from a learned and arrogant ministry, they believed, but from within the body of the meeting in the persons of "god-called" ministers.

**4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE QUAKER CONTEXT, OR THE CONTEXT ABSORBED**

In my Introduction to this Block I had asserted that I would use the Block to enlarge upon some contexts of American literature "other" than the Puritan context which has, till recently, received inordinate attention from American Studies scholars as being the only context for the American cultural enterprise including the production of its literary texts. The other contexts thus suppressed included the Quaker context, the Indian context, the Black context and the Poor White context, all of which indispensably went into the making of the Puritan self.

**4.0 OBJECTIVES**

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction: The Quaker context, or the context absorbed.
- 4.2 The Indian context, or the context eliminated.
- 4.3 The Black context, or the context invisible 1.
- 4.4 The Poor White context, or the context overshadowed
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Readings.

Structure

**UNIT 4 SOME "OTHER" CONTEXTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE**

The Quakers insisted upon living inviolate and orderly lives of thrift and frugality. Every person should have a "calling," a committed engagement to work in this world. Even in jail, the Quakers busily set about working at crafts and skills. These habits helped to make them well-to-do merchants, leading to the very best that they were people with one foot in the meeting house and the other in the counting house.

But though the Quakers had a lot in common with the Puritans, the two sects held theological opinions, opposed to one another. The Puritans were horrified by the Quakers' belief in the perfectibility of all human beings. If there is evil in the world, declared the Quakers, it lies in external institutions of hierarchy, power and violence, not inside the human heart. Where Puritans thought of God as supreme authority, and in his image built strong institutions of government, in which the magistrate was central, the Quakers regarded God as absolute love, and in his image built a civil society without supervisory or superintending structures.

Thus, the Quakers sought to apply the Sermon on the Mount in the most literal sense, creating a world of equality and fraternity here and now. They aided the poor and the destitute, and were the first to condemn slavery. They believed in complete equality between men and women--women had leading roles as charismatic leaders in the Quaker movement--as well as between everyone in society. They would not refer to anyone as "Mister" (which originally meant "master"), called the King "Charles" instead of "King Charles," and always used the familiar forms "thee" and "thou" instead of the more formal "you" in interpersonal conversation. Since "hat honour" was insisted upon in seventeenth century European life (inferiors always took off their head covering in the presence of superiors), Quakers wore theirs even in the king's presence.

The Quakers grew in numbers, reaching perhaps 60,000 by the 1680s, but this was in the face of sheer repression. It was common for a Quaker congregation to be fined thousands of pounds for not attending Anglican services, for Quakers by the thousands to be imprisoned or to have their livelihood denied them for not taking oaths. What they wanted, therefore, was to find a place of refuge abroad, some place in the king's empire where they might live in peace--and, they hoped, attract converts by the virtue and purity of their lives and religion. For years, this searching went on, into the islands of the Caribbean and on the North American mainland.



William Penn sealing the 1683 treaty under which Indians and settlers prospered in peace and mutual respect

In 1674 a group of Quakers, including the gifted William Penn, joined to buy the western half of New Jersey as their place of settlement. As an oppressed minority

they were acutely conscious of the need for guaranteed fundamental rights, and the constitution that William Penn wrote for West New Jersey--the Concessions and Agreement--was strikingly liberal. It established an annually elected assembly that was fully independent of the executive. Settlers were guaranteed full due process in court (confrontation of accusers, the right to cross-examination, and the admission of evidence), and trial by jury. There was to be neither life imprisonment nor capital punishment, both novel provisions centuries ahead of their age. Everyone in West Jersey was also guaranteed complete religious freedom, for there would be no established state church. Liberal land provisions were offered to attract settlers, and within a few years hundreds of settlers, mainly Quakers had arrived. (All of New Jersey became a royal colony in 1702, the two halves being merged under a unified government that was provided by New York Colony until 1738.)

A far grander "holy experiment" was set in motion in 1681. King Charles II had owed a large debt to William Penn's dead father, and to repay it he granted to William Penn--a close friend of the Duke of York--a huge proprietary colony (that is, Penn personally owned the land, and had absolute powers of government), Pennsylvania, including what is now Delaware, which had already been settled by Swedes and Dutch. Now, half a century after John Winthrop had taken his company of Puritan settlers to New England to begin their attempt at building a utopian Christian society, Penn and the Quakers set out on a similar adventure.

Pennsylvania was outstandingly prosperous from the beginning. Its rich farmlands attracted a constant stream of settlers, who produced a bountiful supply of food to be sold abroad. Philadelphia was quickly settled by experienced merchants from London and from towns elsewhere in the colonies. By the mid-eighteenth century they had made Philadelphia the third commercial city in the British Empire, after London and Bristol.

Through personal religious ties, Quaker merchants had contacts all over the North Atlantic commercial world, from Germany to the Caribbean. It was not uncommon for an intermarried network of merchants to connect Madeira, London, Barbados, Newport, and New York, and then work together in assisting one another. In London itself there was a vigorous community of Quaker merchants who aided their counterparts in Philadelphia. In the same letters they sent, along with denominational news, reports on crops, prices and finances also.

Pennsylvania's wealthy men soon invested in western lands, reselling at higher prices to incoming farmers. Many of them sought land for the same reason that the aristocracy did in England did--to provide social eminence as well as income. Quaker merchants also were not long in starting to build iron foundries. Because of this, Pennsylvania has been uniquely identified with the metals trade since the colonial days. Based upon this and other enterprises, an aristocracy grew up in Pennsylvania comparable to that of the planters in the Chesapeake and Carolina colonies, the patoons in the Hudson valley and the merchant princes of Boston. However, though they were so like the Puritans in their ways of living (if not in their religious beliefs), in one great particular they differed--they could abide dissent. Indeed, allowing people to dissent, and to believe in and practice their own different faiths in their own diverse ways, was the bedrock of the Quakers' social policy. In turn, this principle would create so great a babble of creeds and sects in their colony of Pennsylvania that their own distinctive identity would be lost.

## 4.2 THE INDIAN CONTEXT, OR THE CONTEXT ELIMINATED

If the Quakers lost their identity due to their own catholicity, the Indians of New England did not have much of a choice but to do so. (You will remember that



'Indians' refers to the original inhabitants of America before the arrival of the English, and not to people of India)

By the 1670s the Indians of New England were desperate. Ever since the brief Pequot War of 1637, they had kept their heads low, traded a dwindling supply of furs for guns and alcohol and gems, and watched their cultures, their identity, and their territories declining. Meanwhile, the wealthy and healthy Puritans were growing rapidly in numbers, from 25,000 in 1650 to 50,000 in 1675. Several thousand "praying Indians" tried to emulate white ways, but a rising generation of proud younger Indians looked upon them with contempt and burned for revenge against the humiliations their people were suffering.

Metacomb, the leader of the Wampanoags (the New Englanders called him King Phillip), had for years brooded over his tribe's fate. In 1671 he had been forced to accept a treaty of absolute submission to white authority in all land sales. Soon thereafter, there began gathering around him a movement of resistance to the whites. The moment of crisis was approaching: either the whites were going to be expelled and the Indians could recapture their pride and dignity with their erstwhile lands, or utter defeat would have to be accepted.

When in spring 1675 a praying Indian revealed the Wampanoag's plans, he was put to death. Consequently, three Indians accused of the crime were hung under New England's laws, following a white man's trial. Now a guerrilla campaign began against isolated New England villages and settlements. Militia troops were raised to retaliate; the alarm went out through all New England and through the summer of that year an elusive Metacomb, joined by other tribes, engaged in battle after battle. In time the whole New England frontier was in flames. The fighting continued for months, on into the winter and then to the spring of 1676. By that time, New England settlers were streaming back to towns nearer the coast and the upper Connecticut valley was ravaged. Towns less than twenty miles from Boston were under attack.



Plymouth, 1621. Indians join colonists in three days of things, the first harvest.  
The remnants of life in the New World left little time for  
festivity, but artists of the early years, and many since,  
have created a history—moments of light-  
heartedness, dignity, and devotion for the young country.

But the conflict had become one of simple endurance, and the Indians were running out of food and fire power. Fleeing westward they ran into the barrier of the Iroquois, their traditional enemies. Turning back to their ancestral lands, they again came under attack. In the summer of 1676 surrenders began, leaders were executed, or sold into slavery in the West Indies. In August 1676 Metacom was slain.

The first of the great Indian wars was over, but it had been a shocking holocaust, easily among the most savage and costly of all such conflicts in American history.

The Five Tribes of the Iroquois were different from the other Indians whom the colonists encountered. Occupying the Mohawk Valley in New York, their powerful confederacy with its 10,000 people terrified all other interior tribes. They undertook widely-ranging campaigns over vast distances, sending other Indians fleeing in terror before them and redistributing the whole interior pattern of tribal residence.

Curiously enough, when not at war they were extremely mellow and urbane. The Iroquois based life within their confederacy on arrangements for individual freedom and government by consent of the governed that contrasted sharply with the situation in most European countries. Their principal chiefs were known as "powerful reasoners," wise and formidable men who relied on a clear and distinct set of ideas for guidance. Moved by some inexplicable genius, they had been able to construct an enlightened and enduring confederacy in the midst of an Indian world characterized by dissipation and disintegration. Common concerns of the confederated tribes were settled through representative interactive councils and not by the use of force.

The prime mover of this inspiring confederation was an extraordinary individual named Hiawatha. Inspired by another extraordinary individual named Deganawidah who had a transcendent vision of universal human bonding, Hiawatha attempted to unify the then endemically conflicting Iroquois tribes by moving back and forth from tribe to tribe, trying to teach them to live peacefully with the rest of the tribes.

The government of the Iroquois confederacy was fashioned thereafter under the guidance of Deganawidah and Hiawatha. A completely civil confederacy, it did not allow warriors to be representatives to the federal councils, for they might tend to take warlike stands. Each tribe had a given number of representatives, who could be removed for wrong-doing by their own tribes. The "capital" of the Iroquois League moved about; it was located near the present town of Cazenovia, New York (south of Syracuse), when white men came into contact with the confederacy.

In their relationship with white men, the Iroquois tried to play off the "inimical" French against the "friendly" British. In order to cement their friendship with the British, the Iroquois became the middlemen in the fur trade, delivering to Albany what would otherwise have gone to Montreal. Thus they ruled virtually uncontested over an empire of thousands of square miles, from the Atlantic to Lake Superior, from Canada to the Tennessee River.

Yet it was their alliance with the British that proved to be their undoing, implicating them in the British defeat in the American War of Independence. Thus ended a unique empire devoted to humanitarian ideals of liberty and fraternity, conceived and executed by an Indian people prior to the arrival of the whites--and surviving even today in the traditions of the Iroquois who still live in the Mohawk Valley.

## 4.3 THE BLACK CONTEXT, OR THE CONTEXT INVISIBLISED

Even as the Indians were encountering the onslaught of white power, material as well as cultural, the whites were engaged in importing yet another ethnic group into America with the express purpose of exploiting them to erect their own structures of state and civil society.

The African slave trade first began in the 1500s, bringing workers to the Spanish empire and to the large Portuguese possession, Brazil. Indeed Africans have always made up a larger proportion of the Brazilian population than they ever have that of North America. It was common in large parts of the country for slaves to outnumber whites three to one. Indeed it could be stated without hyperbole that the influence of Africa upon Brazil was second only to that of Portugal.

When the English founded their North American colonies in the 1600s, people of African descent appeared within them almost as soon as the whites. In a famous event in 1619, the first group of black slaves (possibly indentured servants) disembarked at Virginia. During the 1630s, the first colonial laws were enacted formally establishing the institution of slavery.

The Virginians of 1619 were in dire straits. Among them were the survivors from the winter of 1609-1610, the "starving time," when, crazed for want of food, they roamed the woods for nuts and berries and dug up graves to eat the corpses of those unfortunate fellow-colonists who died in batches till, all in all, they were reduced to sixty in number.

The Virginians needed labour, to grow corn for subsistence and to grow tobacco for marketing. They had just figured out how to grow tobacco, and in 1617 they sent off the first cargo to England earning a decent profit.

They could not force the Indians to work for them. They were outnumbered, and while, with superior firearms, they could massacre Indians they could not capture them and keep them enslaved; the Indians were tough and tough, and at home in these woods as the transplanted Englishmen were not.

White servants had not yet been brought over in sufficient quantity. Besides, they did not come out of slavery, and did not have to do more than contract their labour for a few years to get their passage and a start in the land they had arrived at. Such labourers were kept at their work by making settlement difficult so they could not live as independent farmers, or their terms of service were extended (which was often done, by various devices), or were kept poor. This produced a permanently turbulent, potentially explosive lower class.

The alternative was the use of black slaves. To their credit, the Virginians actually did not create the institution of slavery. Black slaves were commonly available as a regular item of trade. Using slaves, then, meant simply keeping them in the condition once purchased, and dispensing with the use of those troublesome white servants.

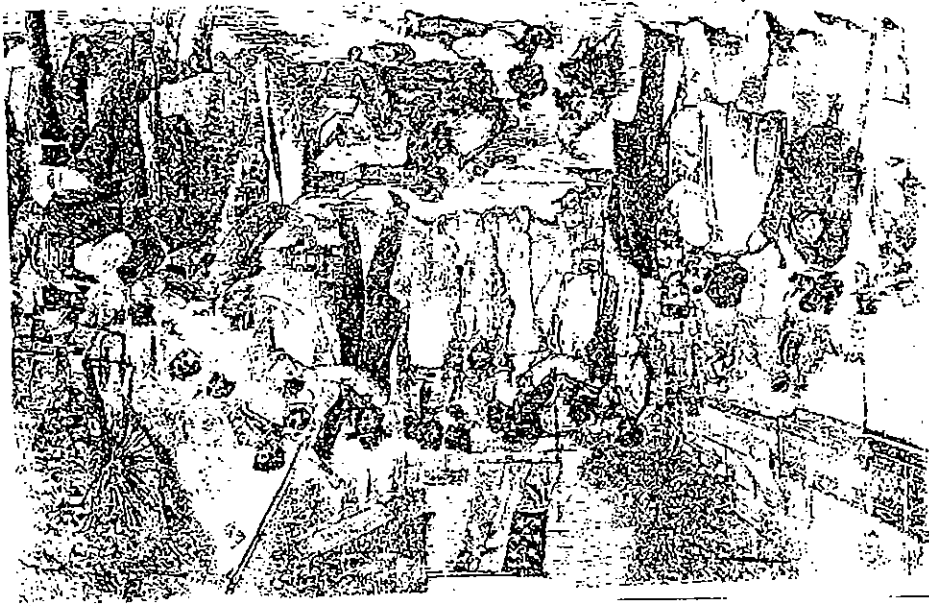
Naturally the English colonists started taking a major role in stimulating the enormous movement of people from Africa to America. Perhaps more people made this crossing, in fact, than from Europe. A conservative estimate is that during the whole course of the slave trade, perhaps 15 million Africans were delivered alive from one end of the America to the other. The number who perished either in Africa during long slave journeys or on the infamous slave ships might approach that figure. Starvation and sicknesses in the slave ships' stinking holds took a frightful toll. The Africans also fought back against their captivity, whenever and wherever they could, in bloody battles with their captors. On other occasions, captives simply hung themselves en masse into the sea to drown, turning in the water to shout derisively before disappearing from sight.

Colonists intentionally imported male as well as female slaves, so that the slaves had children, whom the owners got free of charge. Between 1700 and 1750 Virginia planters acquired about 45,000 slaves, but the black population actually increased during those years from perhaps 10,000 to 100,000. In such a situation, profits could be excellent, for a burgeoning labour supply meant burgeoning sales of tobacco.

Slave traders announced their sales in newspaper advertisements and broadsides like this one, from South Carolina. Note the imbalanced sex ratio among the slaves in the cargo. American Antiquarian Society.

TO BE SOLD,  
 On Thursday the third Day  
 at Auction next,  
 A CARGO  
 OF  
 NINETY-FOUR  
 PRIME, HEALTHY  
 NEGROES,  
 CONSISTING OF  
 Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS,  
 Twenty-four WOMEN, and  
 Sixteen GIRLS.  
 JUST ARRIVED,  
 In the Brigantine DEMBIA, from  
*St. Barc, Mattoe, from SIERRA-  
 LEON, by*  
 DAVID & JOHN DEAS.

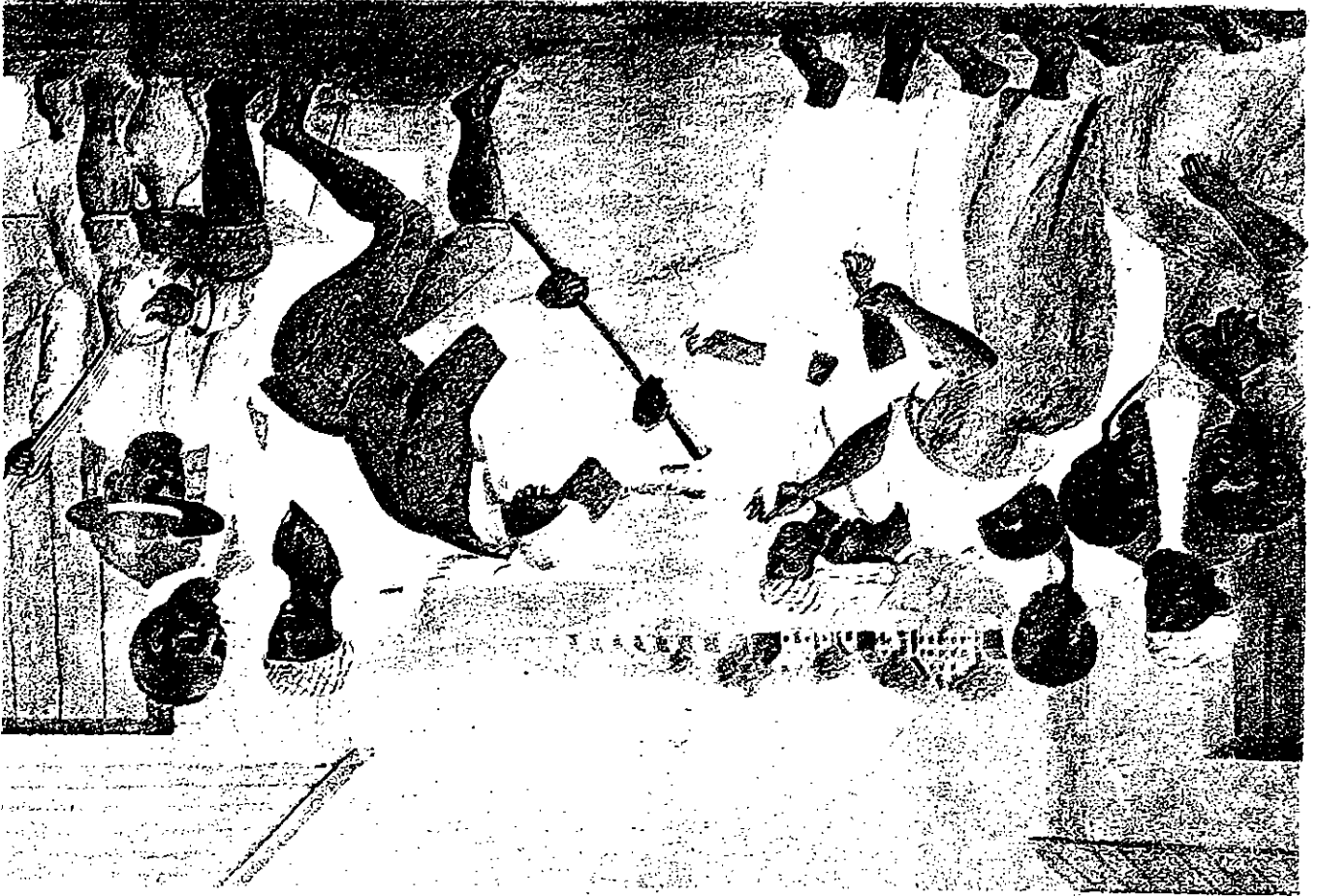
Auction of Slaves



Gradually slaves were employed in a diversity of jobs, as metal workers, miners, builders and the like. However, their primary utilisation continued to be in agriculture, on plantations where gang labour and disciplined group endeavour were practised.

Slavery came to Virginia in a big way when planters stopped buying the contracts of white servants. By the end of 1600s possibly half of the Virginia labour force consisted of slaves and the balance swung swiftly in that direction thereafter. The inflow of white indentured servants from England into Virginia dwindled away, which meant that the later inflow of white freed men into Virginia life also subsided. Now the threat of an angry labouring class of truculent white men was somewhat mitigated. Labour became more or less attached to skin colour. All white men increasingly had something to share, whether rich or poor: their status as free whites above enslaved blacks. This made for a powerful bond between white people.

No less than the Europeans, the black slaves brought from Africa varied widely in skin colour, appearance, stature and culture. They came from ancient societies with highly developed states, some of them so powerful that, except for tiny trading posts here and there, Europeans made no attempt to conquer the vast interior of Africa for Africans did not leave their cultural heritage behind when they were forced into slavery. This unique painting, done in 1775 or after, shows slaves passing their few hours of leisure on a Sunday or holiday with a dance. Several identifiably African elements appear in the picture. The drum and banjo-like instrument are both of African origin, as are the scarves and cane used in the tribal dance. The blue-and-white bandannas worn by two of the women are similar to Yoruba cloth (from West Africa). Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, Virginia.



hundreds of years after the slave trade began. Slave seekers, traded with the Africans, arriving off the coastline and sending in boats; they themselves did not trek into the interior and capture slaves.

In the great African principalities, as in contemporary late medieval Europe, slavery was widespread. In Europe and Africa it was simply an extreme form of servanthip applied to captured men and women from outside the nation or faith. Christians in Europe had given up enslaving other Christians, but infidels did not fall within the ambit of humane consideration. The slave in Africa, however, was treated more like a human being, who could marry, keep his family together, and progress out of slavery. Only in America, and particularly in the English colonies, did the idea evolve of the slave as a sub-human kind of chattel, to be bought and sold like a piece of real estate.

In their homelands, the Africans had developed a culture that was not only rich, but also intricate. The village unit (in which most Africans lived) had its skilled labour class, which was frequently divided into guilds of potters, weavers, wood-carvers and metal-workers. Agriculture was a highly organised communal undertaking since the land belonged to the entire village. In the interior regions, the African economy was largely pastoral, centring on the raising of goats, sheep and cattle. Great aggregations of interrelated people constituted kinship networks presided over by a patriarch. This person, in consultation with elders, served as judge, administrator, treasurer and diplomat.

African society was embedded in a rich cultural life in which sophisticated sculpturing in bronze, wood and ivory played an important part in religious observance. Complex musical compositions, involving instruments such as the violin, guitar, flute, zither, harp, and xylophone, entwined every aspect of life. Dancing likewise was intimately intertwined with daily life. African literature, like the literature of the Indians of America, was basically oral, and like Indian-American literature, was rich in scientific information, history and poetic nuances.

For a while, the slave was thought of as an indentured servant, similar in status to but different from an English person labouring in the fields under contract. Certainly there appeared to have been free blacks in Virginia and Maryland not long after the use of slaves began. This was because English law in the seventeenth century did not recognise slavery, and there was a considerable period during which the legal status of slaves in the mainland colonies was in question.

The uncertainty regarding the black person's position as a slave however had been settled long before 1700. Enslaved men and women were clearly owned for life as were their children. They were not yet fully depressed into the legal condition of a mere piece of property with no democratic or personal rights, but that status was not far away. Eventually, American slavery became one of the most absolute forms of enslavement known to history. Chattel slavery, where marriages were not recognised in law, where slaves had virtually no authority other than their master, existed only in the English-speaking colonies. (In India, too, as you know, the custom of bonded labour for life existed under the 'zamindars' or land-lords.)

Certain revolutionary alterations in the English economy over the seventeenth century had allowed for the release of the entrepreneur from any government controls and consequently granted owners of property, whether in the form of land, or goods, or chattel slaves, the liberty to handle their property entirely as they desired. That this vastly energised the English economy is without question, but the "progress" was questionable when looked at through the lens of social and moral values.

The planters of Virginia and of the other southern colonies of North America inherited this economic system. They were free to treat their chattel absolutely

according to their whims and fancies. The state and the several churches were impotent in the matter of regulating the management of slaves by their masters because financially they were wholly dependent upon their white patrons. Therefore, the "peculiar institution" of slavery in the English colonies thrived very much under laissez faire conditions.

#### 4.4 THE POOR WHITE CONTEXT, OR THE CONTEXT OVERSHADOWED

The use of blacks as slaves, in some measure, spared whites from coming to terms with the class schisms within their own society. But the schisms were by no means eliminated altogether.

In 1676, seventy years after Virginia was founded, the colony faced a rebellion of white frontiersmen, supported by servants and slaves, a rebellion so intense that the governor had to flee the burning capital of Jamestown, and England decided to send a thousand soldiers across the Atlantic, hoping to restore order among the forty thousand colonists. This was Bacon's Rebellion.

Bacon's Rebellion began with conflict over how to deal with the Indians who, on the western frontier, constantly threatened those whites who had gone to settle there after having been denied lucrative land grants around Jamestown.

Violence had escalated on the frontier before the rebellion. Some Doeg Indians took a few hogs to redress a debt, and the whites, retrieving the hogs, murdered two Indians. The Doegs then took out a war party to kill a white herdsman, after which a white militia company killed twenty-four Indians. This led to a series of Indian raids with the Indians, outnumbered, turning to guerrilla warfare. The government at Jamestown declared war on the Indians, but proposed to exempt those Indians who cooperated. This seemed to anger the frontierspeople, who wanted total war but also resented the high taxes assessed to pay for the war.

Times were hard in 1676. It was a dry summer, ruining the corn crop, which was needed for food and the tobacco crop, needed for foreign exchange. The great mass of people lived in severe economic straits. Governor Berkeley, in his seventies, tired of holding office, wrote wearily about his situation: "How miserable that man is that Governes a People where six parts of seaven at least are Poore Endeighted Discontented and Armed."

His phrase "six parts of seaven" suggests the existence of an upper class not so poor. In fact, there was such a class already developed in Virginia. Nathaniel Bacon, the leader of Bacon's Rebellion, himself came from this class, had a good bit of land, and was probably less enthused about redressing class grievances than about killing Indians. But, as historian Howard Zinn has analysed, he became a symbol of class resentment against the Virginia establishment, making it through the mandate of an election to the legislative assembly of Virginia.

When Bacon insisted on organising armed detachments to fight the Indians, outside official control, Berkeley proclaimed him a rebel and had him captured, whereupon two thousand Virginians marched into Jamestown to support him. Berkeley let Bacon go, in return for an apology, but Bacon went off, gathered his militia, and began raiding the Indians.

Bacon died soon after of natural causes, and the rebellion fizzled out. A task-force of thousand soldiers sent from England managed to subdue the rebel garrisons, comprising freemen, servants and slaves, by a combination of guile and force. At the end of the operations, twenty-three rebel leaders were hanged.

It was a complex chain of oppression in Virginia. The Indians were plundered by white frontiersmen, who were pillaged by the Jamestown elite. And the whole colony was being exploited by England, which bought the colonists' tobacco at prices it dictated and made 100,000 pounds a year for the King.

For the masses of Virginia, however, the governor represented the most visible source of their exploitation, and as Richard Lee, a member of the Governor's Council, noted, their support of Bacon in his conflict with the governor was prompted by "hopes of levelling."

"Levelling" meant equalising the wealth. Levelling was to be behind countless actions of poor whites against the rich in all the English colonies, in the century and a half before the Revolution.

The people who joined Bacon's Rebellion were part of a large underclass of miserably poor whites who came to the North American colonies from European cities whose governments were anxious to be rid of them. In England, the development of commerce and capitalism in the 1500s and 1600s, the enclosing of land for the production of wool, filled the cities with vagrant poor, and from the reign of Elizabeth on, laws were passed to punish them, imprison them in workhouses, or exile them.

In the 1600s and 1700s, by forced exile, by lures, promises, force, and by their urgent need to escape the living conditions of the home country, poor people wanting to go to America became commodities of profit for merchants, ship captains and eventually their masters in America. Abbot Smith, in his study of indentured servitude, *Colonists in Bondage*, writes, "From the complex pattern of forces producing emigration to the American colonies stands out clearly as most powerful in causing the movement of servants. This was the pecuniary profit to be made by shipping them."

Indentured servants were bought and sold like slaves. Servants had few rights, could not marry without permission and could be separated from their families. Beatings and whippings of servants was common. Servant women were raped.

Finding their situation intolerable, and rebellion impractical in an increasingly organised society, servants reacted in individual ways. Sometimes they were just lazy and disobedient. Sometimes they hit out physically at their masters. Many sought to annul their bondage through escape. And a few went on strike.

But those poor whites in America who were not servants did not have an easy time either. It is quite clear that class lines hardened through the colonial period and the distinction between rich and poor became sharper. While the deprived majority scrounged around for a livelihood, the privileged minority within the nascent cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Charleston monopolised the wealth and resources of an expanding economy.

Everywhere the poor were struggling to stay alive, simply to maintain themselves at a subsistence level of existence. All the cities built poorhouses in the 1730s, not just for old people, orphans, widows and crippled, but for new immigrants, war veterans and unemployed. In New York, at midcentury, the city almshouse, built for one hundred homeless, was housing over four hundred. A Philadelphia citizen wrote in 1748: "It is remarkable what an increase of the number of Beggars there is about this town this winter." In 1757, Boston officials spoke of "a great Number of Poor who can scarcely procure from day to day daily Bread for themselves and their families."



The colonies, it seems, were societies of contending classes--a fact obscured by the emphasis in traditional histories, on the external struggle against England, the unity of colonists in the American Revolution. The country therefore was not "born free" but born native and alien, slave and free, servant and master, poor and rich. As a result, the political authorities were opposed "frequently, vociferously, and sometimes violently," according to sociologist Gary Nash. "Outbreaks of disorder punctuated the last quarter of the seventeenth century, toppling established governments in Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina."

With the existing problem of Indian hostility, and the increasing danger of slave revolts, the emerging problem of the dissatisfaction among poor whites, servants as well as otherwise, troubled the colonial elite. As the colonies passed their hundredth year and went into the middle of the 1700s, as the gap between rich and poor widened, as violence and the threat of violence escalated, the problem of control became serious. What if these different despised groups--the Indians, the slaves, the poor whites--should combine? Bacon's Rebellion was an especially fearsome event in the opinion of the rulers of Virginia because in it white servants and black slaves joined forces. The final surrender was by "four hundred English and Negroes in Arnes" at one garrison, and three hundred "freeman and African and English bond-servants" in another garrison. The naval commander who subdued the four hundred wrote: "Most of them I persuaded to go to their Homes, which accordingly they did, except about eighty Negroes and twenty English which would not deliver their Arnes."

A significant factor which came in the way of such subaltern unity on a wider scale was the development, by the end of the third quarter of the eighteenth century, of a white middle class, formed in the new cities, of independent farmers and moneyed tradespeople, who, given some rewards for making common cause with merchants and planters, would be a solid buffer against poor whites, slaves and Indians. These middle-class Americans might be invited to join a new elite by, on the one hand, being assured protection against competition from members of "other" races and, on the other hand, being seduced with aspirations of emulating the established rich. The *Pennsylvania Journal* wrote in a typical piece in 1756: "The people of this province are generally of the middling sort, and at present pretty much upon a level. They are chiefly industrious farmers, artificers or men in trade; they enjoy and are fond of freedom, and the meanest among them thinks he has a right to civility from the greatest." Indeed, there was already a substantial middle-class fitting that description, not only in Pennsylvania but in most other states of America. But to call them "the people," as did the *Pennsylvania Journal*, was to omit the displaced Indians, the black slaves and the desperate poor whites. The contexts of these ignored groups were hardly ever considered in dominant accounts of the American literature canon, although it was through the very process of their marginalisation that the canonical texts and context of American literature, as we have known them over decades, established themselves as such.

#### 4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I have tried to account for some "other" contexts of American literature which the Puritan context, till recently taken as the only context of this literature, managed to sideline and even suppress. These include the Quaker context, the Indian context, the Black context and the Poor White context, all of which, in their very marginalisation, made possible the projection exclusively of the Puritan context of American literature.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. In what ways were the early Quakers in America similar to, yet different from, the early Puritans in America?
2. Give an account of how the first white settlers in America ensured that neither the culture of the Indians nor the culture of the Blacks would supersede, or even survive, their own?
3. How did the white elite in the English colonies of North America during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries prevent a united assault against themselves by the poor whites, the slaves and the Indians?

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Same as for Unit 1, and

E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia: Two Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Class, Authority and Leadership*, 1979.

Edwin B. Bronner, *William Penn's "Holy Experiment": The Founding of Pennsylvania 1681-1701*, 1962.

Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*, 1975.

Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America*, 1974.

Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, 1975.

John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-bellum South*, 1979.

Carl Bridanbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen 1590-1642*, 1968.

Richard Hoistader, *America at 1750: A Social History*, 1971.

## UNIT 5 FROM THE COLONIAL TO THE FEDERAL: THE CONTEXTS OF THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

### Structure

5.0	Objectives	5.0
5.1	Introduction: The material basis of the American Enlightenment	5.1
5.2	The Enlightenment in America	5.2
5.3	Slavery and the Enlightenment	5.3
5.4	The American Woman of the Eighteenth Century	5.4
5.5	Let Us Sum Up	5.5
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5.7	Suggested Readings	5.7

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to take stock of the contexts of American literature produced between the period of the early European colonial settlements in America and the formation of a federal association of these colonies in the wake of their struggle to achieve independence from the domination of the government in England. This period is often referred to as the period of the American Enlightenment, taking off from the Enlightenment in England in terms of its ideas and ideals. Some of these ideas and ideals, as well as their exponents are presented in the Unit. The Unit intends to offset the 'optimism' of the Enlightenment ideology in general by focussing upon certain 'darker' aspects of the Enlightenment period.

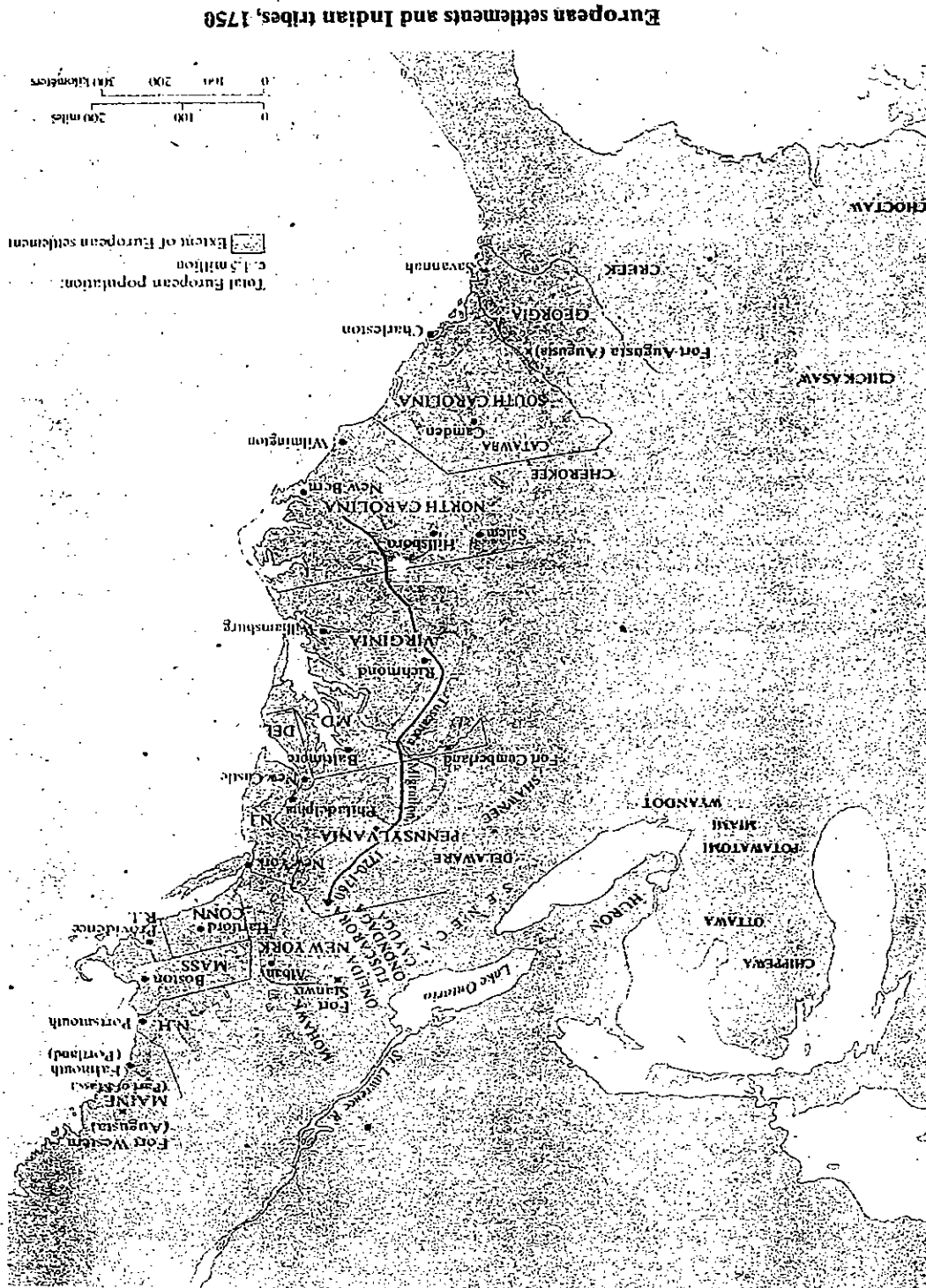
### 5.1 INTRODUCTION: THE MATERIAL BASIS OF THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

By the early 1700s two distinct economic worlds had taken shape in the colonies, generally north and south of Pennsylvania's southern border. One exported two crops, rice and tobacco, to Europe, and was in the process of constructing all its ways of living and thinking around a unique institution: chattel slavery. The other consisted overwhelmingly of, not the big planters such as those who owned the tobacco and rice plantations but, of small farmers free of feudal obligations to anyone superior to them. These two societies were unlike anything in the British Isles or in Europe as a whole.

The distinction between the southern and the northern colonies gradually began to be erased with the expansion of agricultural activities in the north to the extent that the colonies there started exporting their produce, contrary to their earlier practice, to the colonies in the south and beyond, to the West Indies. To facilitate this emerging commerce, by the 1720s a common paper currency was floated, bringing with it prospects of profit and riches. Soon, the placid colonies were living through a boom period.

At the hub of this boom was the new-look colonial city, no longer an extension of the countryside that it once used to be. Immigrants were beginning to pour in from

Germany and Ireland in the 1720s, and thousands of slaves were being purchased in the South. A high-rate of survival among American-born white children, who were reared in far healthier surroundings than children in Europe--eight live children in a family, as against four in Europe, was common--accelerated the rise of population, as did a relatively low death rate. In 1700 there had been approximately 250,000 people in the colonies. By 1775 there would be about 2,250,000 (and 5,300,000 by 1800) including people belonging to the indigenous tribes. A modern, multicultural America was in the making.



European settlements and Indian tribes, 1750

Transatlantic trade flourished, and settlement slowly but surely stretched beyond the limited coastal beachlands of the seventeenth century into the fertile back country, soon reaching the Appalachian Mountains and entering their long interior valleys.

## 5.2 THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN AMERICA

With mounting affluence and influence, people, books and ideas moved back and forth across the Atlantic in rising volume.

One of the many fascinating imports flowing into America from Europe after 1700 was a new way of thinking about God, nature, and humanity: the Enlightenment. Founded in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, and especially in the work of towering English thinkers, like the physicist Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Enlightenment thought was consciously scientific, rational and this-worldly. As such, Enlightenment thinking became for a small minority of educated Americans a critique as well as a counter to classic, traditional Protestantism. Henceforth, these two ways of thinking would inter-mingle in the American mind, producing a curious and contradictory blend of theistic belief and sceptical humanism.

The New Learning arrived with a dramatic suddenness in 1714, when Yale received a gift of books on Newtonian physics and Lockean philosophy.



Harvard College (1726) founded by the Puritans

Newton simply wiped away the traditional view of the universe, brilliantly demonstrating how a few laws of physics could explain the motions of all heavenly bodies. The marvellous order and harmony, he believed, was the clearest possible demonstration of God's existence and authenticity, and of His real intentions for humans as well as natural life. Educated people who read Newton no longer saw the universe as controlled by an infinite number of spirits, each with its own planet, star, or comet to supervise. The sky seemed swept clean. All was geometry, calculation and predictability. The universe was not a space of mysteries and uncertainties. It was, above all, a reasonable universe.

John Locke applied this way of thinking so pervasively in political and social and human affairs that he became the preeminent philosophical influence in the eighteenth century thought, especially in America. He was fascinated by the power of reason, though he did not think it all-powerful. A moderate man in everything, he held that some things could never be explained by humanity's reasoning powers, that

there were limits to what we could know on our own. About God, for example, he said we could know little, other than that He is the author of the universe and a pervasive influence in human life. People therefore need the Bible, Locke said, for only in revelation from God could they learn essential truths about the divine that reason, unaided, could never reveal. However, he believed true Christianity consisted of only a few essentials, and therefore he not only urged, but exemplified, a wide toleration of all Protestant beliefs.

An archetypal product of the American Enlightenment was the figure of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). Franklin represented the essence of the Enlightenment--in his celebration of rationality, practical conduct and materialism. A self-made man and a man of science, Franklin characteristically expressed a preference for what his contemporaries called "natural religion" or deism. If natural laws govern everything, people such as Franklin asked, wasn't nature itself God's truest Bible? The



West's Benjamin Franklin experimenting with electricity has look of wizardry.

"reasonable" method in religion, therefore, according to them, called for a simple procedure: discover what things all people (that is, all "civilized" people) believe in, wherever they are. By this means, true religion could be found. This came down to a belief in a supreme deity, God, in a code of ethics divinely established, which tells us how to live; and a belief that there is an afterlife in which people will receive their rewards and punishments for their deeds in this world. Church, rituals and miracles were simply local superstitions and wholly unnecessary.

Some people were not ready to go so far. They believed that Christ, the ultimate miracle, was an expression, in some inexplicable way, of God's desires in this world. But they rejected the concept of the Trinity ("God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost") as not only mathematically paradoxical, but also contrary to natural law. Christ was a man, perhaps a divinely inspired one, but not God Himself. There was only one God, they said; thus, these people were called Unitarians. The Bible remained important to them as a book of divine teachings about how we should live with each other. Unitarians believed each person must rely upon his or her own reasoning powers, keeping in mind that there was little that could be certain in religious matters. They believed that the individual is fundamentally good, and that if all persons listened to the voice of conscience they would be listening to the voice of God. Unitarianism circulated as a kind of underground faith in England in the mid-eighteenth century, prominent among scientists and intellectuals. It came to America in the century's late years; most of America's Founding Fathers, including Franklin, would have called themselves Unitarians.

Another notable figure of the American Enlightenment was St. Jean de Crevecoeur (1735-1813). A friend of Benjamin Franklin and a truly Frankinian character, this French-born emigre used his classic *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782) to celebrate the "enlightened" practice of democracy in America. The Frankinian aspect of Crevecoeur's work is most readily apparent in the "American Farmer's" enthusiastic approbation of the values of individualism and industriousness which formed the basis of the existence of a freeholder such as himself.

It is the freeholder no doubt who is for Crevecoeur "the American, this new man" about whom he seeks information though his famous query "What then is the American . . . ?" Indeed the first eight of Crevecoeur's twelve "letters" are devoted to answering this question. The American, Crevecoeur says, is a European or the descendant of an European "who, leaving behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds." In the "great American asylum" the poor immigrant is freed from the oppression of a feudal society, from the taxation of landlord, church and monarch, from involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penny and useless labour. "Here religion demands but little of him; and little voluntary service to the minister and gratitude to God; can he refuse these? Be he a trader, farmer, craftsman or common labourer, he will be rewarded amply for his labour, so that in time he will cast off his servile timidity and acquire the dignity and self-confidence of a true human being. No wonder Crevecoeur should exclaim: "We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world."

But, if in the projection of the perfection of American society in his first eight "letters," Crevecoeur echoes Franklin, in the last four "letters" he clearly signals the limits of the Frankinian discourse. It is in the ninth "letter" itself that we find Crevecoeur striking the first disturbed notes of a contrary and contradictory theme. The occasion is provided by his visit to Charleston and his witnessing of the "facts" of Negro slavery as it is practised in the South. The question that he now asks is not "What then is the American, this new man?" but "What then is man; this being who boasts so much of the excellence and dignity of his nature, among that variety of unscrutable mysteries, of unsolvable problems, with which he is surrounded?" The line of inquiry leads him on to other trajectories of investigation and observation.

What does the history of the earth show us "but crimes of the most heinous nature, committed from one end of the world to the other? We observe avarice, rapine, and murder, equally prevailing in all parts. The evil in human nature rivals the perversity of physical nature, which manifests itself arbitrarily in famine, diseases, elementary convulsions and dissensions, to such an extent that "one would almost believe the principles of action in man, considered as the first agent of this planet, to be poisoned in their most essential parts."

Crevecoeur's admission of the insufficiency of reason as a guide in human affairs represents another strain of Enlightenment thought, obverse of that articulated by Franklin. In Europe as well as in America many people, especially clergymen, reacted aggressively to the ideologies of rationality and materialism, and sought to re-establish the idea of a religion based on spirituality and emotionalism. "Natural religion" (such critics said) gave people the sin of pride. They exalted their worldly powers and forgot their human weaknesses. Full devotion to Christ must be expressed every hour of every day. Christ must fill and permeate one's being.

Preaching these ideas, John Wesley and George Whitefield, two Anglican priests, led a religious revival which swept England in the late 1730s. Enormous crowds in the fields listened enraptured. Storms of released feelings struck multitudes, as Whitefield, an especially dynamic preacher, warned of terrible sufferings that lay ahead for the unbelieving and held out salvation to all who truly believed in Christ.

There was great excitement when the famous Whitefield arrived in America in 1739. He was greeted by enormous crowds from one end of the colonies to the other. Everywhere he preached "vital religion" against "natural religion." So fantastic was the response that he was called the Wonder of the Age. Emulated by many American preachers, he thus helped to launch the revival frenzy that swept the colonial world in the years 1739 to 1744, the Great Awakening.

As the revival progressed, all colonials awaited New England's reaction, for that region had long been recognized as America's foremost "plantation of religion." It was the emergence of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1748) at Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1734 and 1735 that seemed to many to be the real beginning of the American revival. In New England, where there was much anxiety about rising affluence, individualism, and the breakup of old ways, the underlying tension exploded with especial violence. Enthusiasm achieved unmatched heights, reaching near delirium in its early stages.

Edwards utilized this enthusiasm and recast Calvinism to align with revivalism, thus becoming the most important Puritan theologian since John Calvin himself. The joy of the Great Awakening, he said, was good and proper. It was a delight that rushed in on people as their entire beings reacted to the love of God and to the beauties He had created in this world. But Edwards was a true Calvinist. God, in his mind, was still the blazing awesome, all-powerful, and wholly majestic Being who willed all things and was the centre of faith. Considering the perfection of God, Edwards said, people could see in contrast how prideful, lustful, and selfish they were in their self-centred, petty lives. Consider the universe that God had made, how harmonious and perfect it was; consider the beauties of the natural creation, of all that was of God. Astonished and overwhelmed by all this people would be drawn to God, as in nature all things were drawn by gravitation to a common centre.

Left to ourselves, he said, we are bound for hell. Such a fate was appropriate for creatures so corrupted and tarnished. This made God's salvation all the more ravishing to consider. Salvation, for Edwards, meant living not only a moral life, but also a life in which people worked for the regeneration of all society, in its institutions and arrangements as well as in its religion. Working across the boundaries of religious sects with others similarly regenerated in other churches, the new elect would transform the world. There had thus appeared once more, in the



### 5.3 SLAVERY AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

For all its celebration of reason, the American Enlightenment witnessed the large-scale expansion of the irrational institution of slavery. As the economy enlarged, Southern planters joined whites in the Caribbean Islands and Latin America in calling for more slaves from Africa. And by 1700 a new crop was making its appearance. About 1685 it had been discovered that the flat coastal lowlands of South Carolina were ideal for raising the ancient grain brought from the Orient to the Occident in the Middle Ages: rice. Slaves taken to the region around Charleston were put to work in large gangs on extensive rice plantations.

The harsh climate in the swamps and wetlands, and the regions endemic tropical diseases, brought horrifying death rates to the slave populations. However, high profits allowed the small white population to live in safety and luxury in Charleston, and, when the colony of Georgia was founded in 1732, in Savannah. Directing their plantations from a distance (i.e. they did not live in the presence of their slaves and come to know them as individual persons), they regarded the cost of replacing those who had died as simply an unavoidable cost of operation. The rice plantations sent eighteen million pounds of their crop to Europe in 1730; by 1770, exports had reached the huge total of 76 million pounds, and the price had even risen 10 per cent. Thus, black slaves, despite their high death rate, continued to be highly profitable. By 1750 they constituted 60 per cent of the Carolina population. In 1775, South Carolina alone held 100,000 slaves.

The other great region in the South lay around the Chesapeake Bay. Here the economy was built around the tobacco plant, which was raised most efficiently on small farms. Due to over-production, tobacco prices remained fairly low, keeping profits down. Thus, Virginia planters could not generally afford slave gangs. They tended, in fact, to buy more black women from Africa than did rice planters, in order to acquire cheaply, through later child bearing, the slaves it was hard for them to acquire directly. This in turn allowed for a healthier and more vigorous family life among Chesapeake Bay slaves, who in any event were free of sickness because they did not work in disease-ridden swamps, and in large gangs, where contagious diseases spread rapidly. The Virginia slaves therefore flourished through natural increase in a fashion strikingly different from the situation further south, and especially from that in the cruel Caribbean island sugar plantations. There were over 170,000 slaves in Virginia in 1775, who amounted to almost half of the colony's population.

Desperate to increase their profits, slave owners extracted work from their slaves with utter ruthlessness. Idleness was not tolerated, indeed severely punished. Beatings became harsh and savage. Fugitive slaves could even be freely, legally killed for their crime. Also slave owners evolved an elaborate code of laws, practices and attitudes to rationalise their brutal treatment of the slaves, and make slavery appear right and proper and indeed a duty.

In the eighteenth century, of course, this was a situation not limited to the South. From Pennsylvania northward there were scattered concentrations of black slave populations, particularly in towns and cities. New York had the highest proportion, with perhaps 15 per cent of its population black; New Jersey and Pennsylvania contained 8 per cent; and in New England as a whole the figure was 3 per cent. In general, by the 1790s a higher proportion of the whole population was black than at any point ever again in American history: some 20 per cent.

With black people growing in numbers far more rapidly than whites, there was great fear of slave rebellions, which in fact began taking place, on a small scale, as early as 1663 in Virginia. This led to the creation of stringent, often savage, slave codes in all the colonies. These codes were built on two concepts: absolute authority of slave owners over slaves, and the belief that blacks were "of barbarous, wild, savage natures [and] wholly unqualified to be governed by the laws, customs, and practices" that applied to whites. New York, with its many slaves, had a tough regimen of slave codes; in South Carolina, where by 1765 there were two blacks to every white person, regular slave patrols gave the countryside a military character.

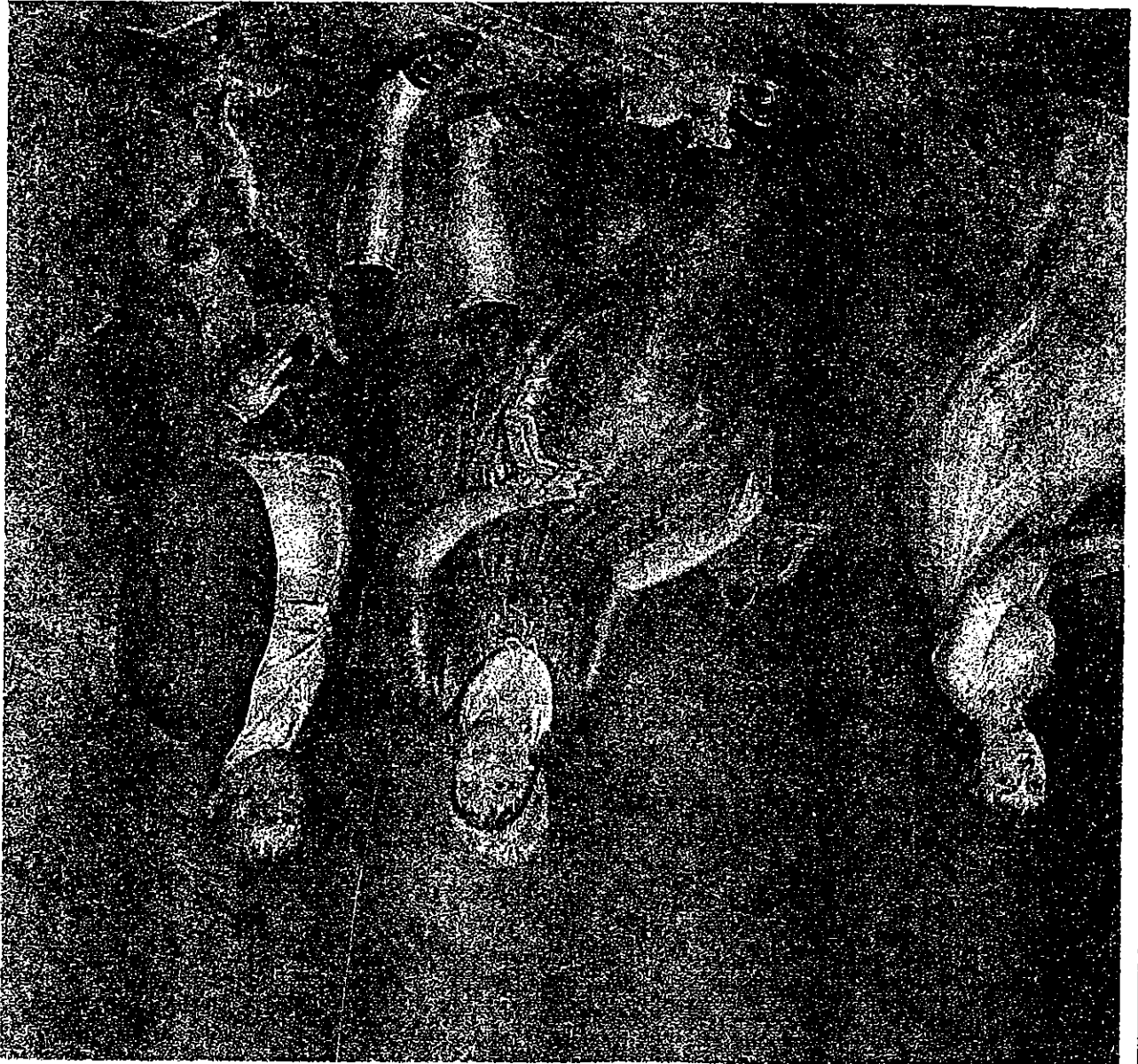
Rivaling the spectre of slave revolt as a source of tension in the South was the obvious and widespread mingling of the races particularly where blacks were most numerous and under the strictest, most dehumanizing controls. One of the great paradoxes in race relations is that the heaviest intermingling occurred precisely when black Americans were the least free, not after the ending of slavery. Nothing aroused such powerful anger in white men as the thought of black slaves forcing themselves on white women, a common and obsessive fear. Despite disapprovals and disallowances from London, southern states often used castration, sometimes in an astonishingly routine way, as a punishment or as "taming" tactic for black men. Few things so aided the rise of English contempt for Americans--indeed, northern contempt for southerners--as the manner in which slaves were treated from Chesapeake southward.

## 5.4 THE AMERICAN WOMAN OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The irrationality of blatant race-oppression was matched by the irrationality of subtle gender-discrimination in eighteenth century America. The codes of gender discrimination, in fact, were inbuilt into the structure of the colonial American family. The form of family which the colonials brought with them from Britain was much like that familiar to modern Americans: nuclear family, in which husband and wife and their children formed a household. Land was generally granted to the head of the household--the father. As the generations passed and the original tight village communities of the early colonial phase broke apart, families tended to live in separate, isolated homesteads. By the 1750s, intermarriage between households in thousands of small towns and villages in the northern colonies had built a strong network of relationships which helped to make community life stronger than it had been. Nonetheless, nuclear families remained the basic social units in colonial life. Within the family, the need to be almost entirely self-sufficient made for a close interdependence between husbands and wives. There was no question which of the two was legally and morally superior. Male supremacy was the rule (which is not the same as saying it was a law of nature). This was expressed most dramatically in the possession of land by men, not by women (unless they became widowed), since land was the economic basis of almost all life.

Women and men usually worked separately, the one in the house and the kitchen garden, the other in the fields and with the livestock, but the two activities flowed into a single economic unit. Broadly, men's work centred around farming while women's work centred around manufacturing. Women preserved the vegetables and salted the meats, brewed the beer and pressed the cider. In addition they wove cloth, made wool and sewed dresses. They also dipped candles, and cared for family health by preparing home remedies and soap. Preparing meals was but the last stage in the manufacturing process, and this was done in addition to the routine tasks of bearing and rearing children.

Nonetheless, wives were considered inferior to their husbands whom they were to obey--reverently. Colonialists thought of the home as a "little commonwealth" in which man's authority provided government and administration, even if he were himself unruly. Everyone, in fact, was thought to occupy a certain position on the social hierarchy; all of life was thought to be arranged within the Great Chain of Being, and subjection to men was women's role.



On the other hand, Puritans and Quakers seemed determined to treat women as persons of substance and significance. Men were lectured endlessly not to be dictatorial, and women were instigated not to be dictated to. Colonial courts often moved in to protect women and children from brutal maltreatment of men. Marriage

was made a contract that could be broken, not a permanent, divine, state, as under Catholicism. And, of course, the woman's crucial role in the household, which had to be self-sufficient in a world where 90 per cent of the people lived on the farm, gave "Adam's Rib" a strong position. In addition, both Quaker and Puritan teachings made conjugal love--love between married people--a tender and lofty part of life. Couples were endlessly entreated to express their affection, to regard each other as one flesh and spirit, and thus to avoid the "civil war" that might tragically mar such little commonwealths. In short, there was a distinctly modern quality in colonial American marriage.

### 5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I have tried to describe the evolution of colonial America into a federal structure in the process of engaging with 'modern' economic and cultural influences. The period during which this transition occurred, anticipating America's emergence as a nation-state in its own right, is popularly referred to as the period of the American Enlightenment. This Unit focuses on some major Enlightenment personages as well as on their points of view. Simultaneously, an attempt is made to explore the 'other' side of Enlightenment euphoria--exploitation on the basis of race and gender in particular which made the 'progress' of the Enlightenment period possible.

### 5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Describe and discuss the material circumstances which made the American Enlightenment possible.
2. Sum up the major tenets of the American Enlightenment. Critically comment on the respective positions of Benjamin Franklin, St. Jean de Crevecoeur and Jonathan Edwards vis-a-vis these tenets.
3. Far from witnessing the withering away of racism and sexism, the American Enlightenment provided a fillip to these exploitative practices. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

### 5.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Same as Unit 1, and  
Richard D. Brown, *Modernisation: The Transformation of American Life 1600-1865*, 1976.

Henry F. May. *The Enlightenment in America*, 1976.

Richard L. Bushman. *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*, 1967.

Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*, 1979.

Winthrop, D. Jordan. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro 1550-1812*, 1969.

Mary, P. Ryan. *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present*, 1975.

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## BLOCK CONCLUSION : THE MULTIPLE INTERSECTING CONTEXTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Now that you have read the five Units that make up this Block on Contexts of American Literature, I hope you agree with me that an appreciation of the texts of American literature, including those of European-American or Puritan literature alone, necessitates an awareness of more contexts than merely the Puritan or the European-American context. Even the earliest white immigrants to America established themselves as American not in absolute terms but in relation, initially, to the Europeans from whom they had separated, and then, to the "other," ostensibly not-so-American, inhabitants of the continent, for example, the Indians who came before them and the blacks who were brought in after them. Thus the trope of Americanness became immediately, intricately interlinked with the politics of cultural exclusion and inclusion.

Inevitably, the canonisation of texts of American literature took place on the premise of this politics--so that the narratives, oral or written, of the slave populations or of the indigenous tribes of America remained bracketed out till recently from the category of American literature although they had much to express about the making of America. Talented authors from these "minority" cultural groups such as the Indian Chief Seathl and the black housemaid Phyllis Wheatley (both producing their works in the nineteenth century) became victims of this cultural erasure. Simultaneously, the works of white writers from Cotton Mather to Crèvecoeur, which would never have been authored had there been no "others" for them to reckon with in American society, received canonical acknowledgement. All this suggests the existence not only of multiple, but of multiple intersecting contexts which contributed to the production of the texts of American literature.

It is of course one of the greatest ironies of American cultural history that a monocultural construction was imposed upon it at that very junction, of the intersection between the 18th and the 19th centuries, when American society and culture was becoming, more than ever earlier, irreversibly pluralised.

GLOSSARY

Blacks  
 Descendants of African slaves in America

Hispanics  
 Spanish-speaking Americans of Latin American descent.

New Jerusalem  
 A title used by the earliest Puritan immigrants for the territories in North America freshly settled by them as an index of their aspirations to found a utopian society. Jerusalem was the holy city in Israel associated with the birth of Jesus Christ.

New England  
 A name given by the early English immigrants to the regions on the east coast in North America where they established their first settlements. These regions comprised the territories of modern-day New Hampshire, Maine, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut and parts of New York State.

Red Indian  
 A term used to designate the aboriginal inhabitants of the American continent prior to and through the period of the European conquest of the Americas. They were so called because their European conquerers initially mistook them to be Indians of Asia and because they habitually painted their faces and skins with the most flamboyant colours.

Anglican  
 An adjective used to denote the Church of England and its concerns subsequent to its break with the Roman Catholic Church in the early part of the sixteenth century.

Ecclesiastical  
 pertaining to the Church and to church officers.

Episcopal  
 pertaining to bishops and their authority in the church.

Hegemonic  
 ideologically dominant.

Quit rent  
 rent paid towards occupation of land till actual price of the land is neutralised and the land may be claimed as a freehold.

Bible Commonwealth  
 a community established around the religious principles laid down in the Bible.

Secular heterodoxy  
 expression of dissent on other than-religious matters

Incarceration  
 imprisonment

Eve-induced Original Sin  
 the traditional Christian notion of the Fall of Man originating from temptation offered to Adam by Eve

Adam's Rib  
 a metaphorical representation of woman, deriving from the biblical account of her origin from a rib of man

a landowner with manorial privileges under the colonial governments in New England.

Contract with God as, for instance, in the Old Testament between the Israelites and God

a view, held for example by a sect in Germany in the sixteenth century, that Christians are relieved from the obligation of observing the moral law.

a theory emanating from the monk Pelagius. (4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> century) denying the doctrine of Original Sin

An intellectual/cultural movement in eighteenth century Europe/America emphasizing reason and secular ideals rather than religious norms and faith.

scheme of types, emblems and symbols used as representational aids in biblical narratives.

method of deciphering/decoding used to explain scriptural texts.

Patron

Covenant with God

Antinomianism

Pelagianism

Enlightenment

Biblical typology

Hermeneutic method

NOTES



# 2

Block

## THE SCARLET LETTER

Block Introduction	
UNIT 6	Background
UNIT 7	Reading The Text
UNIT 8	Characterization
UNIT 9	Narrative Technique And Structure
UNIT 10	Critical Perspective
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## BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) is an American writer who lived in New England where we find the oldest settlements in America as described in Block 1. His father died early and he had to spend his early life at the Mannings' home of his mother. Love of books made him lead the life of a recluse. It was the past of New England that stimulated Hawthorne's imagination and he soaked himself in the annals and legends of colonial New England.

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is the first major work of fiction published by Hawthorne. It made him famous all over America. He came in touch with major contemporary writers like Herman Melville, Thoreau, Emerson and a feminist like Margaret Fuller. It was Margaret Fuller who said that the Transcendentalist ideal of freedom was hollow unless it applied to women as well. Fuller drowned herself near Brook Farm, a settlement where a utopian experiment in communal living was tried out. This made a great impact on Hawthorne's mind. There is no wonder that *The Scarlet Letter* is the first major work of fiction in nineteenth century American literature in which the main protagonist is a female. Later on, Hardy in England had published *Tess* and Tolstoy, in Russia, had published *Anna Karenina* in which the action revolved round a female protagonist who defied the social code and suffered due to the rigours of patriarchy.

The structure of this Block is as follows. The first unit examines briefly the life and the time of Hawthorne. The nature of an American romance, as opposed to the British novel, is also examined. Hawthorne's imagination creates in *The Scarlet Letter* a "neutral territory where both the Actual and the Imaginary meet and interpenetrate." The second unit examines the unfolding of the narrative which begins and ends with Hester Prynne, the fallen woman near the scaffold of the pillory in the market. The third unit examines the four major protagonists and their interaction in the tale. The fourth unit is concerned with the narrative structure and the open-endedness of the text. The fifth unit is a brief summary of the critical response to *The Scarlet Letter* in the nineteenth century, the Modern and the contemporary age. All in all, Hawthorne's masterpiece is a carefully designed work of fiction to which each reader responds in his own way. It is a tale that contains a dialogue between the past and the future.

We hope you will read the novel for enjoyment and refer back to portions of it when you have read this block. This will give you deeper insight into the book and enhance your understanding. Page numbers after the quotations from "*The Scarlet Letter*" are from the Wordsworth Classics edition.



Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1862; photograph by Mathew B. Brady.



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**6.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of the background, both historical and literary that shaped Hawthorne as an author of *The Scarlet Letter*. His life and works would also be examined carefully.

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**6.0 OBJECTIVES**

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- 6.0 Objective
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Hawthorne's Life and Works
- 6.3 American Fiction
- 6.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.5 Glossary
- 6.6 Questions
- 6.7 Suggested Reading

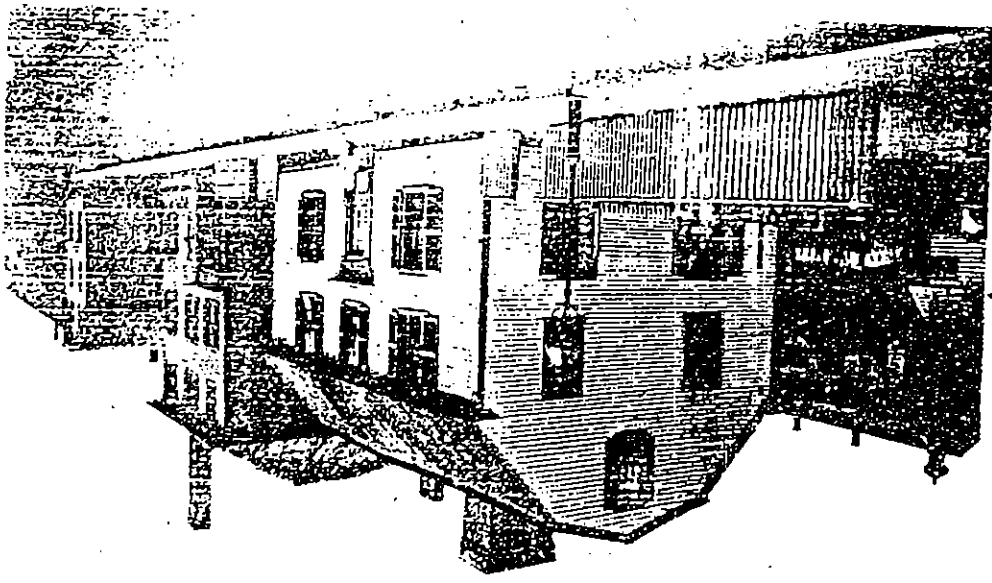
Structure

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**UNIT 6 BACKGROUND**

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Hawthorne's Birthplace, Union Street, Salem.

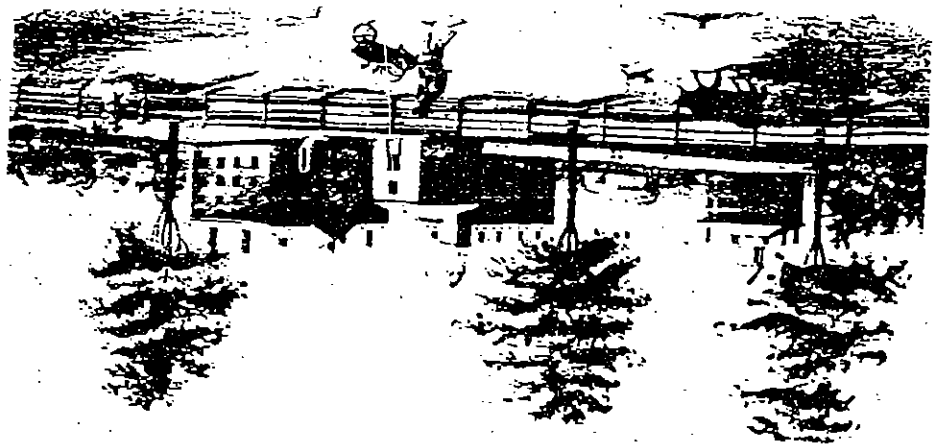


## 6.2 HAWTHORNE'S LIFE AND WORKS

It has also to be noted that the drama of sin and redemption that is unfolded in *The Scarlet Letter* takes place in Boston which was not then a mega city. It was a small settlement of grim-faced, sour and peevish Puritans who couldn't tolerate any dissent or challenge to authority. Life in those days was regarded as a grim battle between good and evil and the people believed that the Black Man, that is Devil was waiting in the forest to trap the souls of unwary people. In colonial New England the people also believed in witches acting as the agents of Devil. You will find in *The Scarlet Letter* an old lady Mistress Hibbins, a witch, who urges Hester Prynne to come to the forest and become a disciple of the Black Man (p. 142). Later on Mistress Hibbins was executed as a witch. The fact that she was a sister of Governor Bellingham couldn't save her life. The Puritans in New England were mortally afraid of the witches and the Black Man of the forest. Both Hester Prynne, the fallen woman and Arthur Dimmesdale, the guilty priest had to contend with witches and the Black Man of the forest.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) is an American writer who lived in New England where we find the oldest settlements in America. *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is a work in which the writer has described vividly the life of the early settlers in a period known as colonial America. As you will remember in the introduction in Block I most of the settlers in New England were Puritans and Dissenters who had been persecuted by the Anglican Church in England. These settlers had, however, come to New England with a belief that they were God's chosen people and it was their sacred mission to set up a Utopia in the new continent full of wilderness and savage native Indians. In the very first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* you will find the following statement: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" (p.65)

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born at Salem, Massachusetts in a prominent Puritan family that had migrated to New England in the early seventeenth century. His father was a sea-captain and his mother came from an ancient family called the Mannings. He lost his father when he was barely four years old. Consequently, the child spent his early life at the Manning's home. At the age of nine, he became lame for a while and developed a love of solitude mostly spent in reading books. There were plenty of books and Hawthorne loved in particular the works of Spenser, Bunyan and Shakespeare. There is no wonder that allegory and Christian symbolism are so pronounced in *The Scarlet Letter*. The historical romances of Sir Walter Scott also had an impact on Hawthorne and he started reading the annals and old records of New England in order to come to terms with the past.



The Campus at Bowdoin College, ca. 1820.

Hawthorne attended the Bowdoin College in Maine. He made many friends during his college days. One of his friends was Horatio Bridge who later on subsidized the publication of his first collection of stories *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). He also befriended Franklin Pierce who became the 14th President of the U.S.A. and it was through him that Hawthorne managed to get the consulship at Liverpool in England. As a college student Hawthorne had started writing stories but it was only on his return to Salem that he published his first work of fiction *Fanshawe*. It was an anonymous publication at his own expense and he never admitted publicly his authorship of the book.

The keenness of Hawthorne to become a writer is, however, expressed trenchantly in his letter to his mother. He wrote to her, "I do not want to be a doctor and live by men's diseases; nor a minister to live by their sins; nor a lawyer and live by their quarrels. So I don't see that there is anything left for me but to be an author" (Introduction, *The Scarlet Letter*): Hawthorne continued to lead a secluded life at Salem after his graduation and soaked himself in the history of colonial New England. It was the life and thought of the early settlers that preoccupied him most of the time. During summer he travelled to various parts of New England and familiarized himself with contemporary life. He also began writing stories but found it difficult to publish them. Publishers were not keen on publishing stories by an unknown author. He destroyed many of the stories that he wrote. It was, however, in 1837 that he was able to get his first collection of stories published. As mentioned earlier, *Twice-Told Tales* was published with the help of his college friend Horatio Bridge.

The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 marked a turning point in Hawthorne's life. He became famous but it didn't bring him a fortune. Herman Melville was so fascinated by the masterpiece of sin and redemption in New England that he dedicated his magnum opus *Moby Dick* to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Henry James made a pioneer study of Hawthorne as a master of American fiction. During his stay at Concord Hawthorne also came in contact with thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau. You know Concord was a famous colony of writers in New England and is associated with the development of Transcendentalism. This school of philosophy laid stress on the divine in Man and in the infinite capacity of Man for bettering his self. Hawthorne was not a Transcendentalist like Emerson and Thoreau and affirmed in the last chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, "we are sinners all alike" (p. 310), but some traces of its philosophy could be found in his portrayal of Hester Prynne and Pearl. The romantic, idyllic

Hawthorne had also fallen in love with Sophia Peabody, the youngest of the famous Peabody sisters of Salem. His marriage brought him happiness--and anxiety as well. It was difficult for him to support his wife and family on the meagre earnings from his writing. He sought a job in the Custom House at Boston from 1839 to '41 and at Salem from 1846 to '49. He also participated in an experiment in communal living at the socialistic settlement of Brook Farm in 1841. He stayed at Brook Farm along with his wife for a while but it didn't really solve his financial problem. The pursuit of a Utopia appeared to him impractical and unrealistic. You can find a sceptical reference to a Utopia in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne returned to Salem and found himself in a difficult situation. He had financial problems, and along with the burden of supporting two daughters he had also to endure his mother's illness and death. He began the writing of *The Scarlet Letter* at a time when he was deeply depressed and heart-broken. There is no wonder that he described it as a hell-fired story embodying all his pent-up emotions.

Sophia Amelia (Peabody) Hawthorne, 1847



scenes inside the forest showing the coming together of Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale remind us of the benign influence of nature in *Thoreau's Walden*.

From 1850 to '53 Hawthorne was at the peak of his creative power. *The House of Seven Gables* was published in 1851 and showed his preoccupation with the past in New England. It is a work that shows the decline of a family that had to bear the curse of witch-hunting. *Bleekdale Romance* was published in the next year and was a sarcastic rendering of Hawthorne's experience of living at Brook Farm. *The Life of Franklin Pierce* was published in the same year. It was Hawthorne's contribution to the Presidential Election Campaign. The President appointed Hawthorne the Consul at Liverpool in England. The stay in England gave Hawthorne a chance to imbibe afresh the influence of the mother-country. He also got a chance to stay in Italy and wrote his last major work, *The Marble Faun* (1860) in which the experience of an expatriate American artist in Rome is narrated. On his return to America, Hawthorne settled down in his Concord home. His health deteriorated and he undertook a trip to mountains and sea-shore in the company of his old friend, Franklin Pierce. He died quietly in sleep and was buried in a grave near Concord home. The grave was named Sleepy Hollow.

His unfinished romances were published after his death: *Septimus Fellon* in 1872, *The Dolliver Romance* in 1876, *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret* in 1883 and *The Ancestral Footsteps* in 1883.

## 6.3 AMERICAN FICTION

Hawthorne described himself as a romancer rather than a novelist. He was, however, an admirer of the realistic novel as developed in England and admired the realism of Anthony Trollope. In the realistic novel, the focus was on the ordinary life of men and women living in a largely settled society. The social and the economic background was described by the novelist comprehensively and the protagonists acted and interacted in such a manner that the conflict was resolved at the end. The realistic novel largely developed in eighteenth century England as a comedy of manners and usually had a happy ending. It embodied the confidence and robust optimism of an Age of Reason and there was, perhaps, no problem in life that couldn't be solved satisfactorily. From Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* we find the great tradition of the realistic novel flourishing.

Apart from the realistic novel as it developed in England, Hawthorne was also influenced by the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott. He wanted to reconstruct the colonial past of New England as authentically as Scott did for Scotland. There was, however, a basic difference between Scott and Hawthorne. While Scott's impulse was to glorify and celebrate the heroism of the protagonists, Hawthorne's attitude towards New England Puritanism was both critical and sarcastic. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne examined trenchantly the myopia, intolerance and cruelty of the Puritans in mid-seventeenth century New England. The major protagonists like Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth are utterly lonely and alienated from the community of early settlers in Boston, the major city of New England.

There is no wonder that the historical romance as developed by Hawthorne ends on a note of gloom and despair. There is no happy resolution of the conflict and the major protagonists live in a dark and cheerless world. Pearl is the only protagonist in the tale who achieves a degree of success and happiness in her pursuit. One can describe *The Scarlet Letter* as a historical romance or a romance-novel in which the extraordinary, the marvellous and the strange experiences are vividly pictured. The use of the supernatural and the mysterious creates a kind of awe and grandeur in the sombre tale. Consequently, the protagonists are more than realistic and lifelike. They are larger than life and seem to embody certain states of mind. If Hester Prynne and Arthur



Dimmesdale represent the repentant sinner, Roger Chillingworth stands for the unrepentant sinner. If Pearl has the touch of a mischievous spirit, Roger Chillingworth degenerates into Devil that is beyond any redemption.

To sum up, Hawthorne is able to create through his dark brooding imagination, "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and the fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (p.53). In other words, as a romancer Hawthorne is able to encompass both the Actual and the Imaginary in his narrative. While the Actual is transformed into something strange and dreamlike, the Imaginary is made concrete and tangible through symbols. There is no wonder that symbols play such a decisive role in *The Scarlet Letter*. To cite an example, the red letter A fixed on the bosom of Hester Prynne becomes a sacred object that sums up the entire life and destiny of a sinful woman in Puritan-dominated New England. It also seems to encompass the myopia, intolerance and cruelty of the Puritan community in colonial America.

With his capacity to encompass both the Actual and the Imaginary, Hawthorne made a definitive contribution to the emergence of a native tradition of American fiction. The romance-novel or historical romance as developed in America was not preoccupied with manners of various groups in a largely settled society and with the achievement of success. It was preoccupied with the struggle of good and evil in the protagonist's soul in a strange continent where wilderness was much larger than settlements. In such an unsettled continent, the protagonists felt utterly alienated and had to endure alone the unfolding drama of sin and redemption. There is no wonder that Hawthorne's imagination is preoccupied with the Black Man of the forest, that is Devil.

## 6.4 LET US SUM UP

The early Puritan settlers in New England considered themselves as God's chosen people whose mission was to set up a Utopia in the New World. Consequently, their attitude towards dissenters and heretics like Anne Hutchinson was full of righteous anger and intolerance.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in a family of Puritans but he was very critical of the persecution of heretics and dissenters. He was also very keen to become a writer and with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) he became famous all over America.

Inspired by the tradition of realistic novels in England and also the historical romances developed by Sir Walter Scott, Hawthorne established the native tradition of American fiction in which both reality and romance, the ordinary and the marvelous, and the natural and the supernatural are artistically fused. This form of American fiction could be described as a historical romance or a romance-novel in which the Actual and the Imaginary are dovetailed.

## 6.5 GLOSSARY

Utopia:

A state where all ideal conditions exist.

The scaffold of the pillory:

the wooden structure of the pillory where a sinner was made to stand and exposed to public ridicule in colonial New England

The Black Man of the forest:

Devil who was supposed to live in dark forests and to trap the soul of sinners.

Judgement Day:

the day when God will judge all men.

Retribution of God:

just and stern punishment inflicted by God.

The Election Sermon:

An important day in colonial New England when the new Governor took charge of his duty. It was a day of celebration and triumph.

Necromancy:

communicating with dead through magic in order to learn about the future.

Scorching Stigma:

marks of remorse and intense suffering over the heart of the guilty priest, Arthur Dimmesdale. For Hester Prynne, *The Scarlet Letter* (A) became the burning stigma. Therefore, she wanted to throw it away when she went to the forest.

## 6.6 QUESTIONS

1. How did the Puritans in New England regard themselves? What was their attitude to morals?

2. Why did Nathaniel Hawthorne choose to be a writer?

3. Write a brief note on Transcendentalism.

4. How did Nathaniel Hawthorne's historical romance differ from that of Sir Walter Scott?

5. Do you agree with the view that Hawthorne successfully created "a neutral territory" in his romance, *The Scarlet Letter*?

## 6.7 SUGGESTED READING

All quotations are from *The Scarlet Letter*. Wordsworth Classics, 1992.

Baym, Nina. *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Chase, Richard. *The American Novel And Its Tradition*. Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1973.

The Custom-House is also remarkable because it is an affirmation of Hawthorne's credo as a romancer. He uses the image of moonlight in a room in order to convey the peculiar nature of a romancer's imagination. The ordinary tables, chairs and carpets in a familiar room are transformed by moonlight into something strange, dark and mysterious. The mundane and humdrum objects are transformed and made to convey our deeply felt emotions and attitudes. The creativity of a writer does not lie in a photographic reproduction of the surface aspects of humdrum reality but in his capacity

What kind of a business in life--what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation--may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler?" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 23).

After having written two-thirds of the romance *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne took a pause and wrote an Introduction or a background to the grim tale. It was titled *The Custom-House* and contained satirical portraits of fellow workers at the Salem Custom-House from which he was dismissed. Although he was shocked at his dismissal, it was not an unmitigated evil. It was also a sort of blessing because, freed from the routine of monotonous work and drudgery, he could devote himself completely to writing, his true vocation. The Custom-House also gives us an idea of the low status of a creative writer in colonial New England. Hawthorne evokes the hostile spirit of his Puritan ancestors towards himself in memorable words, "what is he? murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. A writer of story-books?"

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of the unfolding narrative in *The Scarlet Letter*. It has to be noted that the threshold of the narrative shows Hester Prynne, the fallen woman, alone at the scaffold of the pillory in the market in Boston with her infant and the climax shows Arthur Dimmesdale, the guilty priest urging Hester to join him at the same scaffold along with her seven year old daughter Pearl. Our purpose is to give you an idea of the various stages through which this change comes about.

## 7.0 OBJECTIVES

Objective	7.0
Introduction	7.1
The Threshold of the Narrative	7.2
Complications	7.3
A Turning Point	7.4
Temptation in the Forest	7.5
Towards the Climax	7.6
Let Us Sum Up	7.7
Questions	7.8
Suggested Reading	7.9

Structure

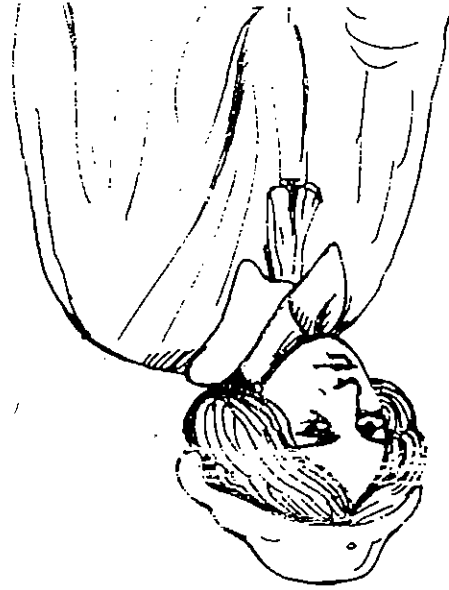
## UNIT 7 READING THE TEXT

to penetrate below the surface and bring out obliquely the dark truths lying buried in our consciousness. To cite an example, one could refer to Hawthorne's description of *The Scarlet Letter* that he found in the Custom-House and out of curiosity he put it on his breast--"It seemed to me--the reader may smile, but must not doubt my words--it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat, and as if the letter were not of red cloth but, red-hot iron. I shuddered and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor" (pp. 48-49). It has to be noted that the phrase "red-hot iron" is a vivid reflection of the awful intensity of suffering associated with *The Scarlet Letter*. There is no wonder that *The Scarlet Letter* ceases to be a simple letter. It becomes a dark and mysterious symbol of a fallen woman's suffering and redemption in colonial New England.

Some critics are of the view that *The Custom-House* is not organically related to the text of *The Scarlet Letter*. This is, however, not true. We learn from it that Hawthorne was trying to develop a native tradition of American fiction in which the natural and the marvellous are artistically fused. The focus is mostly on the strange, the marvellous and the supernatural but they are woven in such a manner that the authenticity of the narrative is firmly reinforced. The details that are given about the recovery of *The Scarlet Letter*, the manuscript of the Ancient Surveyor Pu and the freedom of the writer to expand imaginatively the outline of the narrative are meant to make us believe in the strange and extraordinary tale. If the romancer is not able to make the reader shed his disbelief and make the tale credible, he fails as a creative writer. Hawthorne's credo as a romancer committed to underlying reality--the truth of the human heart--is very perceptively expressed in these words, "Then, at such an hour, and with the scene before him, if a man sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things and make them look like truth, he need never to write romances" (p. 54). In other words, the romance as developed by Hawthorne is not purely imaginary. It creates a strange world in which both reality and romance, the natural and the marvellous, the past and the future are inextricably fused.

## 7.2 THE THRESHOLD OF THE NARRATIVE

Chapters 1 to 4 constitute the threshold of the narrative and introduce us to three of the main characters of the story. There is Hester Prynne, accused of adultery, who is



Hester Prynne

brought out of the prison and made to stand at the scaffold of the pillory along with her infant. *The Scarlet Letter* A, signifying an adulteress, is fixed on her bosom and the men and women of Boston look down upon her and ridicule her. There is also an old man, a stranger amidst the hostile crowd, who recognizes her as his wife. When Hester goes back to the prison her husband meets her and wants to know who her lover is. Hester is prepared to suffer alone and does not reveal the name of her lover. Her husband admits that he has been unfair to her because an old man like him had married a beautiful young woman. He has, however, not been able to condone her lover because he has hurt the husband and deprived him of manly honour and dignity.

There is also the young priest, Arthur Dimmesdale, who urges Hester to name her lover before the community so that both the sinners can be made to repent together for their sin. When she refuses to do so, the priest cannot help commenting, "Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart!" (p.88). It is through this brief but poignant utterance on the part of the priest that the writer is able to evoke our sympathy for the fallen woman. Standing near the scaffold, Hester is able to recollect her early life in old England, the poverty of her parents, the face of her father and her mother, and lastly her marriage to an old, scholarly man who did not bring her warmth and joy of conjugal life. The focus of the narrative is definitely on the early life and destiny of Hester who is first trapped into a loveless marriage and later on into adultery in a city where she has arrived as an immigrant. There is no one in the alien city to offer her consolation and hope.

These opening chapters locate the story in a specific time and place. The scaffold of the pillory is situated in the market of mid-seventeenth century Boston in New England. Men and women who throng the market are stern Puritans and they regard Hester as the fallen woman. According to the law of the land, a sinner in those days, especially a woman was subjected to the extreme penalty of death. A man who is present near the scaffold tells Hester's husband that the authorities have been kind to her and keeping in mind her youth have inflicted a light punishment on her. There is an unmistakable note of irony in the words that are uttered, "But in their great mercy and tenderness of heart they have doomed mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom" (p.82).

The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses not only incidents and dialogues but symbols and images as well. The action is also followed by commentary and reflection. In the very first chapter Hawthorne mentions that the Puritan Utopia that the early settlers wanted to establish in the New World also made provision for a prison and a cemetery. There is also the rose-bush standing near the gate of the prison. The rose-bush reminds the reader of Ann Hutchinson who was a heretic and for her dissent she was put in the prison. Later on, the church authorities exiled her from New England. What Hawthorne is trying to suggest is that Hester is as much a non-conformist and a radical as Anne Hutchinson was. This idea has been expressed briefly through the phrase "the sainted Ann Hutchinson" (p.66). Both of these characters have consciously rebelled against Puritanist dogma and ethics. In the second chapter when Hester stands at the scaffold with the child in her arms she is compared to Madonna and her child. The use of such an intensely Catholic image or the part of Hawthorne shows that he is largely free from Puritan bigotry and intolerance.

Chapters 5 to 11 constitute an important stage in the narrative in which our attention is focused first on Hester and Pearl and later on the complex relationship between Arthur Dimmesdale, the guilty priest and Roger Chillingworth, the physician who clings to him like a leech. After her release from the prison, Hester goes to a lonely cottage outside Boston and leads a secluded life. In those days, a lonely young woman could only survive through her needlework. There was no other profession open to her in colonial New England. It is through her hard work that Hester is able to earn her bread and bring up her child. She dresses herself according to the Puritanic mode of sombre and grave attire but her lovely child Pearl is dressed in gorgeously and flamboyant apparel. It has also been pointed out earlier that there is something oriental and exotic about Hester's natural taste for the gorgeously and the flamboyant. Her submission to an austere and Puritanic mode of dressing is half-hearted. At heart, she is oriental and loves what is flamboyant and gorgeous. She is an alien in colonial New England. It is no wonder that both the mother and the child live a secluded life and even the children of the town "scorned them in their hearts, and not unfrequently reviled them with their tongues" (p. 117). Hester loves Pearl but she is also tormented by her awkward questions. Sometimes she begins to wonder if Pearl is the child of a demon. Her

### 7.3 COMPLICATIONS

You have also to make a note of the fact that the names of the main characters have a strange resonance. For example, Hester's husband assumes the name of Roger Chillingworth. There is something chilling, cold and inhuman about his pursuit of his wife's lover. The guilty priest is Arthur Dimmesdale who is a dedicated pastor but there is something dim, something fading about him. He is also in the habit of keeping his hand on his heart. It is a gesture that indicates his divided self and also the turmoil in his heart—to confess or not to confess. Pearl has the ring of a beautiful and esoteric object of nature and Hester has the oriental and exotic association of the Biblical Esther who was a dark, beautiful and mysterious queen. There is no wonder that *The Scarlet Letter* A that has been fixed on Hester's bosom has been rendered in a flamboyantly fashionable and artistic mode. While to savage Indians it appears like a badge of distinction and excellence, the women of Boston regard it as the work of a brazen hussy and a rude defiance of Puritan orthodoxy and conformity. The sense of beauty that Hester possesses does not at all agree with the Spartan simplicity of men and women in colonial New England. There is something exotic and colourful about Hester. There is also something oriental about her. Her sense of beauty and passion make her look like a pagan goddess.

Hester and Pearl



lovely exterior and resplendent attire cannot hide the terrible inquisitiveness of her mind.

### *The Scarlet Letter*

Later on Hester goes to the Governor's house along with Pearl. It is a very significant point in the narrative. Both the church and the state of New England are unanimous in persecuting Hester. There is a proposal to separate the mother from the child because a fallen woman is not supposed to be a good mother. Hester, however, opposes the proposal vehemently and urges Arthur Dimmesdale to speak on her behalf. Her words to the priest have a contemporary ring even for a reader of our time--"Speak for me! Thou knowest--for thou hast sympathies which these men lack--thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are mother's rights, and how much the stronger they are when that mother has but her and *The Scarlet Letter*" (p. 138). It is clear that Hester is asserting the mother's rights at the Governor's house where she has to confront single-handed the hostile prejudices of male society in colonial New England. It has also to be noted that she is affirming the rights of a fallen woman to keep and bring up her child in a male-dominated society where both the church and the state marginalized such women and rendered them utterly powerless. You can easily imagine how forward-looking and almost prophetic the assertion of a fallen woman's mother rights are in *The Scarlet Letter*!

Arthur Dimmesdale defends vigorously Hester's right to bring up her child and his vehemence creates a suspicion in Roger Chillingworth's mind. His reaction is brief, "You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness" (p. 140) but it shows a strong doubt in his mind pertaining to the exact relationship between Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale. There is no wonder that from this point onwards Roger Chillingworth, the physician, is preoccupied with the priest's health and the state of his mind. He begins to stay in the priest's house and keeps a constant watch over him. The people of Boston come to know that "the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of especial sanctity, in all ages of the Christian world was haunted either by Satan himself, or Satan's emissary, in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth. This diabolical agent had the Divine permission for a season to burrow into the clergyman's intimacy and to plot against his soul".

There is no wonder that Roger Chillingworth is overjoyed when he sneaks to the priest who is sleeping and sees a sign on his chest. We are not told what that sign exactly is but it is clear that the rest of the narrative will focus on the drama of sin and redemption going on in the priest's soul. He will either confess his sin and save his soul or he will be tempted by Devil and remain unredeemed, unrepentant. The priest is very much disturbed at the inquisitive vigil of the physician and goes out of his house almost in a trance to confess his guilt and save his soul.

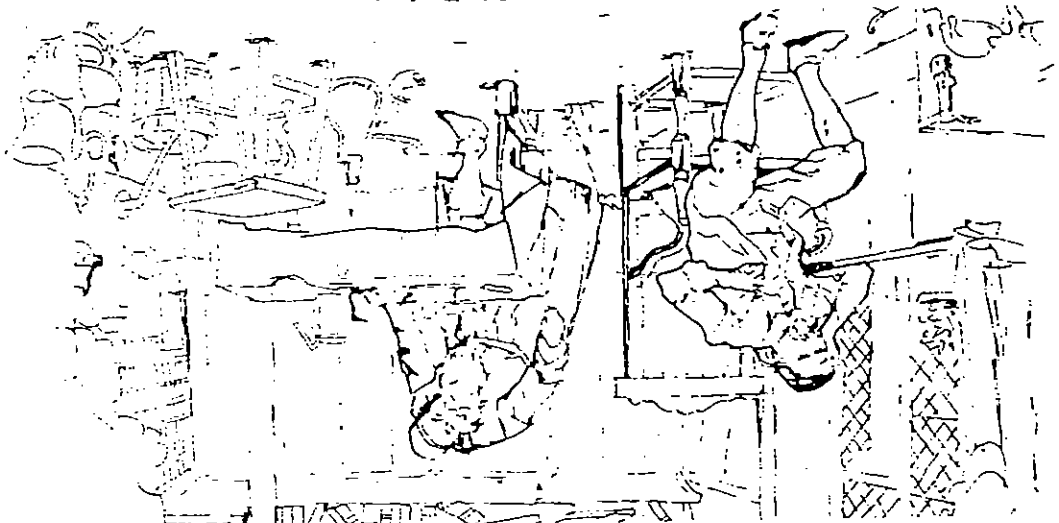
At the Governor's house, Hester also meets Mistress Hibbins who is a witch and who invites her to come to the forest and meet the Black Man of the forest, that is Devil. Hester replies that she would have done it if she had been deprived of her daughter Pearl. It is Pearl, both her innocence as well as her inquisitiveness, that saves Hester from the snares of Devil. Hester's confrontation with Mistress Hibbins creates the atmosphere of mid-seventeenth century New England when Puritans literally believed in witches that tempted men and women and acted as the agents and emissaries of Devil. The word 'leech' refers to the physician, Roger Chillingworth, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. The physicians in those primitive days used to bleed the patients and through that process cured them. In a metaphorical sense, 'leech' means a blood-sucking creature that clings to one's skin and sucks all blood. The image of 'leech' aptly suggests Roger Chillingworth's ferocious cruelty and hatred towards Arthur Dimmesdale whom he suspects of having turned the husband into a cuckold. As an injured and humiliated husband, the physician pretends to be a friend of the priest but, at bottom, he is an implacable enemy. His only joy is to keep on tempting and tormenting the priest till the end of the narrative. It is the painful consciousness of being hounded by the physician that stirs Arthur Dimmesdale into his midnight adventure.

The priest is in such a disturbed state of mind when he stands near the scaffold of the pillory and there is a strange, dazzling light that illumines the whole sky, that he notices the letter A etched boldly in the sky. It seems to the priest that his guilt, long buried in his heart, has been projected all over the sky. We also hear at this critical moment the sceptical voice of the narrator of the tale. The commentary of the sceptical narrator is venchantly expressed in the following words, "In such a case, it could only be the system of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate" (p. 188). What the narrator is trying to say is that the reader must be able to look at the priest in an objective and balanced manner and realise that the suppression of dark truth, that is the sin of adultery has rendered the priest morbid and sickly. He could neither face the Puritan community in Boston with courage and fortitude as Hester has done earlier nor come to terms with his own self. There is no doubt that the priest's egotism and self-love are morbid and sickly and he has a long way to go before he attains the equanimity and courage to go through the ordeal of a public confession of his sin. Yet, he has taken an initial step towards that stage and as such one can safely affirm that chapter 12 constitutes a sort of dress rehearsal for the final public confession on the part of the priest.

Chapter 12 marks a turning point in the tale and it also foreshadows the climax in chapter 23, titled *The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter* in which the priest overcomes his hesitation and fear of social disgrace and confesses his relationship with Hester and Pearl. It has also to be noted that the most crucial action in *The Scarlet Letter* takes place near the scaffold of the pillory in the market. The spot thus comes to acquire a kind of sanctity and mystery. It is linked with Hester's bold confession of her sin at the beginning of the tale and with the priest's confession and acceptance of Hester and Pearl towards the end. The significance of chapter 12 lies in the fact that it shows the priest's willingness to confess his sin of adultery. He is, however, still not fully ready for an honest confession before the Puritan community of Boston. He is afraid of facing public ridicule and losing his face before the community. It is due to this factor that he lets out a loud shriek at midnight. He has yet to acquire the courage and fortitude to confess his sin before the community and face the consequences of his action. He has not yet reached the stage of growth that Hester had reached at the beginning of the tale.

## 7.4 A TURNING POINT

The Leech and his Patient





The chapters 13 and 14 are also preoccupied with the tangled relationship between Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester and Roger Chillingworth. Hester's life of labour and sacrifice has won the respect of the Puritan community in Boston. The narrator's commentary on this transformation is revealing, "She was self-ordained a sister of Mercy or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her--so much power to do, and power to sympathize--that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (p.195). The narrator's contention is that there has been a change in the Puritan community's perception of Hester. They have nearly forgotten her as an adulteress and now they regard her as a Sister of Mercy who has been helpful to the most poor and the most needy women of Boston. The letter A on her bosom has ceased to be a symbol of punishment and persecution. It has now become the cross of Hester and has been sanctified and hallowed by her life as a compassionate Sister of Charity.

There is no wonder that while Arthur Dimmesdale is still hesitant, Hester takes a decisive step in chapter 14. She tells Roger Chillingworth that he has not been fair to Arthur Dimmesdale. He has been hounding him like a Devil, "You tread behind his every foot-step. You are beside him, sleeping and waking. You search his thoughts. You burrow and rankle in his heart! Your clutch is on his life, and you cause him to die daily a living death, and still he knows you not" (p.206). In a situation like this, she has no choice but to be loyal to her lover. She would tell him that Roger Chillingworth was her husband and he has been plotting to catch the priest's soul and trap him into evil. She also urges her husband to be fair in his dealing with the priest, "Forgive, and leave his further retribution to the Power that claims it" (p.210). It has to be noted however, that forgiveness and mercy are alien to Roger Chillingworth and he says that it is his fate--and doom--to trap the soul of the man who has cuckolded him into sin and damnation. He will go his way and she can go her own way.

## 7.5 TEMPTATION IN THE FOREST

Chapters 15 to 19 shift the action of the tale to the forest outside the town. There is a kind of ambiguity about the forest: The Puritans of mid-seventeenth century colonial New England believed that the forest was the abode of the Black Man, that is Devil. You may recall that after Hester leaves the Governor's House with her daughter Pearl in her custody, Mistress Hibbins, the witch, invites her to join the Black Man and his companions in the forest. The scenes that occur in the forest in these chapters are, however, mostly full of joy and happiness. While Pearl plays near the brook, Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale get a chance to talk freely. The priest tells her what has been disturbing him, "Happy are you, Hester, that wear *The Scarlet Letter* openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret" (p.232). Hester is deeply upset at the agony of her lover and tells him, "That old man? the physician?--he whom they call Roger Chillingworth? he was my husband?" (p.234).

The priest is extremely unhappy and tells Hester that he will never forgive her. He, however, loves her so much that his anger subsides but his anger against the physician is unrelenting. He says that Roger Chillingworth has betrayed the trust of a friend. He has been mean and treacherous. He has also violated the sanctity of the human heart. Hester puts a sharp question to the priest, "Does the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-stem desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest track?" (p.238). Hester is able to persuade the priest to run away from the small city of Boston and go either to Europe, that is the Old World, or into the wilderness that is widespread in the New World. Once he is inside the wilderness, he will attain freedom, the freedom to live along with Hester and Pearl. In other words, Hester urges the priest to escape from Boston and begin life afresh. It is clear that for Hester the forest is not only the abode of the Black Man but a sort of

Utopia where the priest will attain supreme happiness and bliss. The wilderness of the New World seems to be more tempting to Hester than the cities of the Old World.

Chapter 18 is appropriately titled "A Flood of Sunshine." Hester is so much thrilled at the prospect of attaining happiness along with her lover and daughter that she throws *The Scarlet Letter* away, removes her cap and lets her hair fall over her shoulders. The narrator's comment on the transformation of Hester from being a Sister of charity to an exquisitely beautiful young woman is telling indeed, "A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had long been so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour" (p.245). The moment of ecstasy for Hester, however, does not last long. Necessity is expressed in the form of the stand taken by her daughter Pearl. She refuses to accept her mother without her cap and without *The Scarlet Letter* restored on her bosom. In chapter 19, Hester is forced to act as Pearl wants her to. She puts on her cap and her rich hair is suitably confined. She also puts on *The Scarlet Letter* on her bosom. The focus of the narrative in this chapter is on the fact that Hester can escape from the wiles of Roger Chillingworth but she cannot escape from the reality that Pearl embodies. That is her sin in colonial New England. The dream of freedom and hope that is generated in the forest is sharply negated by *The Scarlet Letter*, the cross that Hester has to bear on her bosom and the terrible burden of guilt that the priest has to bear within his heart. There is no wonder that the priest eventually comes to regard Hester's offer in the forest as a kind of temptation of Devil.

## 7.6 TOWARDS THE CLIMAX

Chapters 20 to 24 mark the last phase of the narrative and the events move inexorably towards the climax-public confession by the priest on the scaffold of the pillory and acceptance of his relationship with Hester and Pearl. The romantic reunion of Hester and Dimmesdale in the idyllic sanctuary of the forest energizes the priest and he returns to the town a man reborn. There is a feverish rush of ideas in his mind and he looks forward to the plan made by Hester. There has been, however, a change in their plan. Instead of escaping into the vast American wilderness, it has been decided to return to the Old World. As the ship is expected to leave on the fourth day, the priest starts writing the Election Sermon which he will deliver as his parting message to the Puritan community in New England. While the priest gets busy in drafting the Election Sermon, he also becomes aware of many contrary dark impulses in his mind. While returning to the town, he has an impulse to utter a certain blasphemy to one of his fellow priests. He also treats casually the eldest female member of his parish and looks down upon with disdain the youngest female in his parish. In other words, he doesn't behave as a responsible and dedicated priest. There is no wonder that Dimmesdale is at last able to realize that in some insidious way he has been tempted by Devil. There has been so much impety within him that he cannot help crying to himself, "What is it that haunts and tempts me thus? Am I mad? Did I make contact with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood" (p.265).

It is clear that Dimmesdale begins to feel that he has been tempted by Devil in a most seductive mode. It is this realization that gives him the strength to face the consequences of his sin and not to run away from Boston. On the Election Day the whole town wears a gala, festive look. For a change, the people are in a happy mood. They are going to celebrate the assumption of office by a new Governor and also to listen to Election Day sermon by their popular priest, Arthur Dimmesdale. The narrator also draws our attention to the rich heritage of New England Puritans, "But we perhaps exaggerate the grey or sable tinge which undoubtedly characterized the mood and manners of the age. The persons now in the market-place of Boston had not been born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom. They were native Englishmen, whose fathers lived in the sunny richness of the Elizabethan epoch; a time when the life of

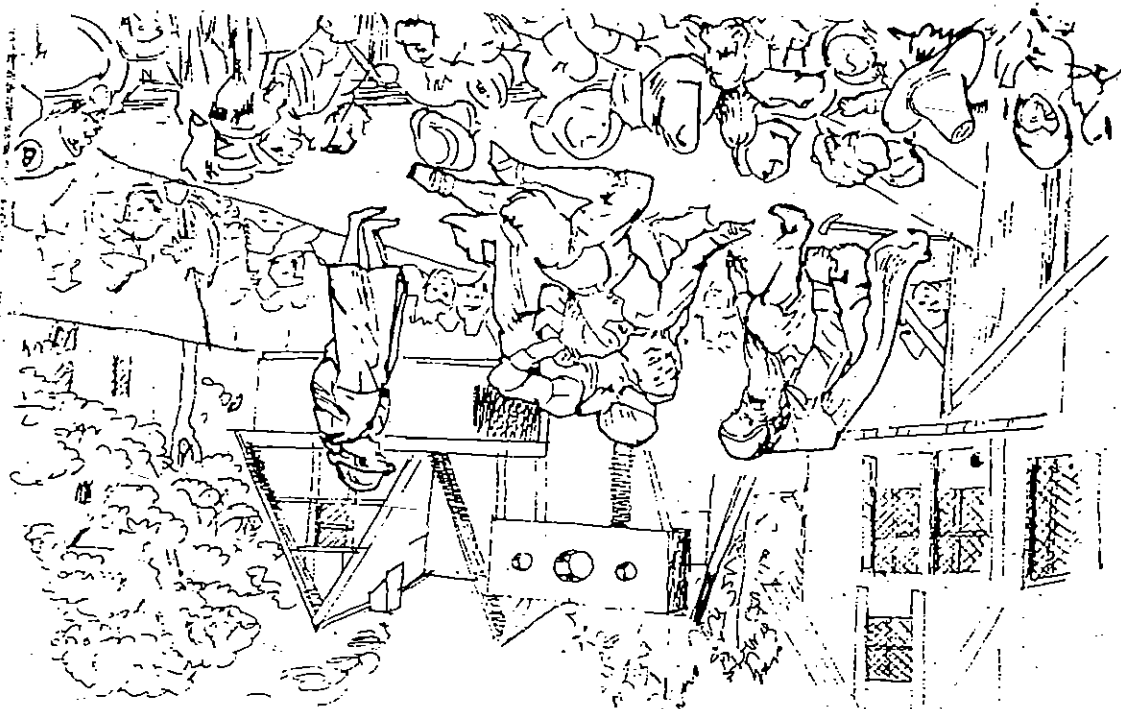
Dimmesdale's Election Day sermon is straight from the heart and the audience is thrilled. The people are, however, shocked to find that the priest begins to look pale and haggard after the sermon. He has been drained of all strength. He also looks like a dying man. As he does not have much time left at his disposal, he urges Hester and Pearl to join him at the scaffold. He also makes a frank confession, "At last! At last! I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood, here, with this woman, whose arm, more than the little strength wherewith I have crept hitherward, sustain me at this dreadful moment grovelling down upon my face" (p.305). After Dimmesdale makes his confession and owns Hester and Pearl, Hester comes forward to help the collapsing priest. In the words of the narrator, "Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom" (p.307). This is a moment that stuns Roger Chillingworth because his plot of revenge against the priest fails miserably and he is seen "with a blank, dull countenance, out of which life seemed to have departed" (p.307). *The Scarlet Letter* is such a rich, romantic tale that it is simultaneously a drama of sin and redemption and a moving love story. The climax at the scaffold of the pillory marks a fitting end both of the spiritual drama of sin and redemption and a heart-warming love story. The lovers are united briefly but unforgettably near the scaffold. There is no wonder that the scaffold comes to acquire a strange kind of awe and mystery. It is the most hallowed spot in New England.

The Market Place



England, viewed as one great mass, would appear to have been as stately, magnificent, and joyous, as the world has ever witnessed" (p.277). In Chapter 21 entitled "The New England Holiday" the narrator has tried to recapture the exuberance and jollity of the Elizabethan England. Apart from the inhabitants of Boston, some sailors and a few Indians are also present among the crowd. There is a procession that moves towards the scaffold of the pillory. While Dimmesdale, the priest, is in the procession along with magistrates and fellow-priests, Hester and Pearl are among the crowd gathering around the scaffold.

The last chapter entitled "Conclusion" is a kind of post-script to the main body of the historical romance. The narrator takes over and offers various possibilities to explain Dimmesdale's death on the scaffold. You may recall that he bares his bosom before



The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

he dies in Hester's arms. Some people see the letter A imprinted on his heart. While Hester has *The Scarlet Letter* A on her dress, Dimmesdale has it over his heart. Some people regard it as the result of medicines given by Roger Chillingworth. Some are of the view that it is the result of self-torture inflicted by the priest. Some people are of the view that they did not see anything imprinted on the priest's heart. What the narrator is using here is, according to F. O. Matthiessen, "the device of multiple choice." There is a certain mystery and awe associated with the priest's death on the scaffold and it is not possible to explain it in clear-cut, rational terms. This seems to be the idea behind the narrator's use of the device of multiple choice. What is clear, however, is the fact that Dimmesdale dies in glory but Roger Chillingworth survives like an uprooted weed and dies a year after. He tries, however, to atone for his sin by giving all his wealth to Pearl who has been the daughter of the man he hated the most.

Hester and Pearl disappear from Boston and go back to some country in Europe. While Pearl is happily married to a noble in the old world, Hester returns to her cottage in New England. For her, the cottage outside Boston has become sacred. She resumes her life as a Sister of Charity and puts on *The Scarlet Letter* A on her bosom. The narrator says, "Never afterwards did it quit her bosom" (p.314). Women of the town come to Hester for help and advice. They also want to know, "why they were so wretched, and what was the remedy" (p. 315). Hester looks upon *The Scarlet Letter* on her bosom and replies, "She assured them too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (p.315). You may recall that at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* there is a sceptical reference to the Utopia that the Puritans wanted to establish in the New World. But at the end of the romance the narrator makes a passionate affirmation that men-women relationship would be completely recast in the future. That is a kind of Utopia that would be established in which men-women relationship would be based on natural impulses and women would

be neither wretched nor miserable. They would also not be forced into a loveless marriage with an old man. The ambiguity of the narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* is brought out by the fact that is both a critique and an affirmation of utopia. While a Utopia based on Puritan ideals is negated, a Utopia based on the ideal of equity-based men-women relationship is affirmed. It is undeniable that the Elizabethan and New England past and the glorious future are artistically fused in the tale that is narrated in *The Scarlet Letter*. One could also describe Hawthorne's historical romance as a dialogue between the past and the future.

## 7.7 LET US SUM UP

The most dramatic scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* revolve round the scaffold of the pillory in Boston. It is the scaffold that bears witness to Hester's confession of the sin of adultery. It is near the scaffold that Dimmesdale has his midnight adventure in chapter 12. It is near the same scaffold that Dimmesdale makes his final public confession and saves his soul.

Hester's suffering and redemption largely take place in the cottage outside Boston. Her hard work to earn her bread, her bringing up Pearl as a single parent, her service to the poor and the needy, especially the women earn her the respect and love of the Puritan community in New England. *The Scarlet Letter* A on her bosom ceases to be a badge of shame. It is transformed into something holy and pious and the people look upon it with awe and wonder. There is no wonder that the letter A also shines on the grave where Hester and Dimmesdale are buried side by side. It seems to embody both sin and redemption and also the agony and ecstasy of Hester and Dimmesdale.

*The Scarlet Letter* is a historical romance that encompasses the glory of the Elizabethan England, the bigotry and intolerance of the new settlers in New England, and a brief vision of the future in which men-women relationship would be based on natural impulses and passion. It is a complex narrative in which the various dimensions of the past and a brief but poignant vision of the future are artistically fused. It is a strange work of art in which there is a recurring dialogue between the past and the future. It is both a critique and an affirmation of Utopia in mid-nineteenth century American fiction. You may recall that Hawthorne creates a strange world in *The Scarlet Letter* in which both the Actual and the Imaginary are inextricably dovetailed.

## 7.8 QUESTIONS

1. Bring out the significance of the three scaffold scenes in the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*.
2. How does Hester defend a mother's rights in the scene at the Governor's House? Do you really agree with her?
3. Why does Roger Chillingworth come to stay with Arthur Dimmesdale? Do you think the image of the 'leech' aptly sums up his behaviour?
4. Describe critically the action and interaction between Hester and Pearl in the forest.
5. *The Scarlet Letter* is both a critique and an affirmation of Utopia. Illustrate your answer with suitable examples from the text.

6. Examine *The Scarlet Letter* critically as a love story in which love triumphs over various obstacles.
7. What is the relevance of the 'Introduction, The Custom-House' to the unfolding of the narrative? Does it really help you in locating the romance-novel against the backdrop of colonial New England?

## 7.9 SUGGESTED READING

1. Read 'Tradition and Disinheritance in *The Scarlet Letter*' by Frederick Newsbety and *The Scarlet Letter* by F.O. Matthiessen included in *Norton Critical Edition of The Scarlet Letter*, 1988.  
Also read 'Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter* from the same book. John C. Gerber has made a perceptive analysis of the narrative in Hawthorne's masterpiece.
2. *Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies* by Michael Dunne, University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
3. *Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tradition and Revolution* by Charles Swann, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991.
4. *The American Historical Romance* by George Dekker, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Since *The Scarlet Letter* is more of a historical romance rather than a realistic novel, the characters tend to be allegorical and symbolical. There are various ways in which scholars have looked upon the characters in the book. While Hester seems to stand for art reflected in her exquisite needle work, Dimmesdale stands for religion due to his dedicated work as a pastor in his parish. While Chillingworth stands for science in his relentless search for herbs and medicines, Pearl stands for nature that is radiant, lovable but beyond human control. Taken together, the major characters seem to represent art, religion, science and nature. From another angle, these characters seem to foreshadow the Freudian categories of mind, the Id, the Ego and the Super-ego.

It is Pearl who seems to stand for the Id, and with her wild, impulsive nature is governed by the "pleasure principle." She always acts according to impulses rather than conscious thought. You know Freud said that the Id is the biological part of personality, the seat of instincts and is not subject to any social regulation. While Pearl stands for the Id, Hester stands for the Ego that is operated largely by the "reality principle." Hester is aware of her own self, her Eros and physical needs, but she is also aware of the pressures of external reality, that is the norms of the Puritan community in mid-seventeenth century New England. She also serves as a bridge and link between Pearl, the Id and Dimmesdale, the Super-ego. It is the priest who represents the social and moral dimension of personality and is always governed by the high ideals of society. Dimmesdale has a pronounced conscience and suffers from a terrible sense of guilt and anxiety due to the sin of adultery. It is the dominance of the Super-ego in the priest, and his awareness of the id within him, his craving for Hester, that gives an edge to the drama of sin and redemption that is unfolded so graphically.

## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

Our objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the major characters Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl. We would also give you some idea of the minor characters like Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins. You would also be able to appreciate the complex relationship between the major and the minor characters.

## 8.0 OBJECTIVES

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Hester
- 8.3 Dimmesdale
- 8.4 Chillingworth
- 8.5 Pearl
- 8.6 Minor Characters
- 8.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.8 Questions
- 8.9 Suggested Reading

Structure

## UNIT 8 CHARACTERIZATION

From another angle, Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth seem to represent heart, soul and mind. As a Sister of Charity, Hester is full of compassion and always tries to help the poor and the needy. The narrator makes it clear that Hester stands for heart and as a result she is able to atone for her sin and is transformed into an able nun serving humanity. Dimmesdale is a priest and seems to stand for the soul. He does care for the soul of others and he is also tormented by his conscience. His antagonist, Chillingworth is, however, primarily governed by his mind. His cold, calculating mind, utterly divorced from his heart, stifles his noble impulses as a physician dedicated to the profession of healing. He is too cerebral to be a credible and acceptable human being. While Hester seems to stand for life instinct, that is Eros, Chillingworth seems to stand for death wish, that is Thanatos. You know Eros and Thanatos are two other basic concepts postulated by Freud in the twentieth century. That Hawthorne could foreshadow some of the key Freudian concepts is an indicator of his keen probing into the psyche of his major characters. *The Scarlet Letter* is not only a historical romance; it is a psychological romance as well. The narrative that is unfolded so graphically encompasses action as well as incisive probing into mental processes of the major characters like Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl.

While the major characters are multi-dimensional and complex, the minor characters are more simple and allegorical. Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham represent the head of the church and the head of the state in New England. Their close collaboration makes it clear that the government at that time was a kind of theocracy. They also represent the hegemony of the church and the state in the Utopia established by the Puritans and the individual who in any way challenged the authority of the church and the state had to bear persecution. It has also to be kept in the mind that while the major characters are portrayed as dynamic, that is they undergo a subtle transformation, the minor characters are more or less, static. While the major characters are portrayed as complex characters, the minor characters are rather flat and one-dimensional. To sum up, while the major characters act and interact to create a moving drama of sin and redemption, the minor characters locate the tale in mid-seventeenth century New England. While the major characters soar into a world of romance and make-believe, the minor characters remind us of the historical context of the romance. As we have already told you, the Imaginary and the Actual are closely interwoven in the text creating a sort of "neutral territory."

You may also bear in mind Mistress Hibbins who acts as the agent and emissary of Devil. She is definitely an allegorical character who tries to tempt both Hester and Dimmesdale but does not succeed. The narrator, who belongs to mid-nineteenth century America, has rightly suggested that the dialogue between Mistress Hibbins and Hester could be taken as a parable, that is a confrontation between good and evil. Mistress Hibbins is a product of the Puritan Utopia created by the earliest settlers in colonial Boston.

## 8.2 HESTER

No feature in Hawthorne's romances of the 1850s is of greater psychological and cultural interest than his remarkable heroines. There is no other female protagonist that dominates the narrative as much as Hester does. According to Luther S. Luedke, "The problem of *The Scarlet Letter* is really the problem of how to interpret Hester" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient*, p. 165). It is Hester who is present in the romance at the beginning and it is also Hester who is in focus at the end of the tale. The narrator makes it clear at the beginning that she is not an ordinary woman in colonial Boston. She is dark, handsome and "a rich, voluptuous Oriental" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 105). When she comes out of the prison and moves towards the scaffold of the pillory, her Oriental beauty, dark eyes and dark hair, has a strange, esoteric appeal. Even the letter A that has been embroidered on her sombre dress is designed in a flashy and flamboyant mode. Its flourish and singularity is a sort of cur



defiance and challenge to the all-pervasive grey and sombre that marked the fashion of the grim Puritan men and women in mid-seventeenth century New England. There is something of Anne Hutchinson's non-conformity and radicalism (as described in Block I) in Hester's psychological make-up. As a lonely woman in a hostile city in the New World, Hester submits to the punishment inflicted on her but in a subtle way she also subverts Puritan orthodoxy through her wild, colourful scarlet letter.

Her retreat from the market to the lonely cottage outside Boston marks a new phase in her life. She is able to support herself and her daughter Pearl through her needlework. It is her aesthetic sense and her exquisite needlework that enables her to perform the duty of a single parent in a traditional, male-dominated society. The narrator has drawn our attention to "all the combative energy of her character" (p.99) which enables her to serve the poor and the needy. There is a subtle transformation in Hester and the community that has persecuted her as the fallen woman begins to look upon her as a Sister of Mercy. *The Scarlet Letter* A that in the beginning appears to the community as a badge of sin and shame later on appears as a symbol of her calling as a Sister of Mercy. It is also viewed by the Puritan community as "Able, so strong was Hester Prynne with a woman's strength" (p.195). The letter A, *The Scarlet Letter* to be precise, also becomes "the cross on a nun's bosom" (p.196). In keeping with her status as a Sister of Mercy, Hester's dark, Oriental beauty also undergoes a change. The narrator's comment on this change is revealing indeed, "It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine" (p.197).

While Hester is transformed from a sinful woman into an angelic Sister of Mercy, and from a dark, voluptuous Oriental woman into a nun who deliberately suppresses her youth and beauty by capping her hair, there is another subtle transformation at work. The narrator of the tale makes it clear that "much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstances that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling to thought" (p.198). If in her routine conduct, Hester remains a conformist to the tenets of Puritanism in colonial New England, it is at the level of speculation and critical thinking that she tends to become subversive and challenges the patriarchal basis of man-woman relationship in mid-seventeenth century Boston - "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (p.200). What the narrator is suggesting, commenting on Hester's radicalism, is that before women can really be empowered there has to be a drastic and radical change in their consciousness and mental make-up. Without such a radical transformation in female psyche, the complete recasting of man-woman relationship will not take place and there will be no end to their suffering and persecution in the existing society.

One can sum up, Hester's complex, radical character through the words of David Levin, "No English or American novelist before him had been able to represent convincingly the feelings and thoughts of a passionate woman and scarcely any American novelist had posed such forceful and critical questions for prevailing nineteenth-century beliefs" (*The American Novel* ed. by Wallace Stegner, p.24). Hawthorne is supposed to be Janus-faced, that is he looks both towards the past and the future. It is through Hester that the past and the future are dexterously woven in the text. There is no wonder that a recent critic like Charles Swann has described the text as future-oriented history (p.72). There is no other character in *The Scarlet Letter* who is a better embodiment of future-oriented history, that is one who can be a bridge between the past and the future. It is through an appreciation of the vast range of Hester's conduct and radical thought that one can adequately evaluate *The Scarlet Letter* as a work of fiction illuminating both the past and the future.

Dimmesdale is a respected priest in colonial Boston. He has come to the New World with the learning and sophistication of the Old World. It is, however, his misfortune that he is trapped into adultery with a married woman of his parish. Since he is a man of high status, he is very much aware of his moral responsibility. As a pastor he is responsible for the moral uplift of the men and women in his charge. There is no other character in *The Scarlet Letter* who has such a dominant Super-ego. When Hester stands on the scaffold and makes a public confession of her sin, Dimmesdale also has an acute awareness of his guilt. He is a product of the Puritan ethos that dominates New England and as such he cannot think either in terms of returning to the old world or escaping into American wilderness. It is also difficult for him to confess his guilt in public because he is afraid of losing his status and good name. He admits the courage and strength of Hester but his intense preoccupation with his social role prevents him from doing what she does on the scaffold. He has a divided self. He is aware of Hester's sexual attractiveness but he doesn't have the courage to own her publicly. There is no wonder that he has a habit of putting his hand over his heart. This gesture is an index of the protracted conflict in Dimmesdale's mind. Pearl repeatedly asks her mother why the priest always puts his hand over his heart.

It is Dimmesdale's divided self and agonizing mental conflict that leads to the weakening of his body and mind. The fact of Chillingworth's slaying with him and keeping constant vigil on his psyche adds manifold to his woes. He is driven to such a desperation that he begins to fast, inflict harsh punishment on his body and confesses his sin in such a manner in the parish that the listeners look upon his theatrical confession as a sign of his virtue and probity. The more the priest tortures himself, the more he realizes that he is a hypocrite in the eye of God. The narrator's comment is significant, "He thus typified the constant introspection, but could not purify himself" (p.176). It has also to be noted that the fasting, penance and self-torture are not in conformity with the tenets of Puritanism.

The narrator's comment on Dimmesdale's behaviour is revealing indeed, "His inward trouble drove him to practices more in accordance with the old corrupted faith of Rome than with the better light of the church in which he had been born and bred" (p.175). Whether we evaluate the priest from a secular point of view or from the point of view of a mid-seventeenth century Puritan, he appears before us as a moral hypocrite and a betrayer of love and family responsibility. There is no wonder that the priest has a terrible consciousness of being a non-entity both in a human and also within a theological framework. The narrator has expressed poignantly the dilemma of Dimmesdale, "To the untrue man, the whole universe is false--it is impalpable--it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light becomes a shadow, or indeed ceases to exist" (p.177).

It is in this state of mind that Dimmesdale sees the letter A in the sky as there is a flash of meteors during his midnight journey to the scaffold. The narrator makes it clear that the letter A is simply a creation of Dimmesdale's morbid imagination and is also a projection of his guilt. When he lets out a wild shriek, he has a fear that the entire town of Boston would come to the scaffold and see him with Hester and Pearl. It is clear that the priest's fear of social disgrace is far more powerful than his conscience which prompts him to mount the scaffold and publicly own Hester and Pearl. Since he occupies a distinguished position in the community, it becomes difficult for him to confess his guilt. It is Chillingworth, the antagonist who holds his hand and takes him away from the scaffold. The narrator's comment on this scene is significant indeed, "with a chill despondency, like an awakening, all nerveless, from an ugly dream, he yields himself to the physician, and was led away" (p.190). It is significant that Chillingworth is the man who takes Dimmesdale away from the scaffold where he is united with Hester and Pearl for a brief moment. The priest does not have the strength to extricate himself from the grip of his antagonist.

Dimmesdale has later on a meeting with Hester and Pearl in the forest. It is in its idyllic atmosphere that he agrees to elope with her to the old world. There is a momentary burst of energy within him and he writes the Election Sermon to be delivered on the day the new Governor is to take over. The Election Sermon is a huge success but the priest's triumph is momentary. He is eventually united with Hester and Pearl and dies on the scaffold. Before his death, the priest, however, makes a prophecy. In the words of the narrator "it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord" (p.299). While at the personal level Dimmesdale is full of a premonition of death, he does not fail to forecast a glorious destiny for the Puritan republic in New England. The past and the future are, in the ultimate analysis, as closely entwined in Dimmesdale as they are in Hester. They know that they will not live to see the future materialize in their lifetime but it would materialize one day. There is a Transcendentalist's hope of a Utopia being eventually realized on the earth both for Hester and Dimmesdale. It is their sin that unites them and their hope as well.

## 8.4 CHILLINGWORTH

We have told you that *The Scarlet Letter* is not only a historical romance but a psychological romance as well. Chillingworth, the cuckolded husband, is a fine study of a man degenerating due to an obsession. His obsession is to find out the man who has committed adultery with his wife. When Hester refuses to name her lover in the first scaffold scene, Chillingworth says with vehemence, "But he will be known?--he will be known?--he will be known!" (p.82). As a physician, he is given to the collection of herbs and medicines. He does admit that as an old man he was unwise to marry a young, beautiful woman. There is a touch of regret in his words to Hester--"It was my folly, and thy weakness. I--a man of thought--the bookworm of great libraries--a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge--what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own?" (p.94). It has to be noted that Hester is equally forthright in her reply to her husband, "Thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any" (p.95).

Later on Hester urges Chillingworth to cast her off at once as an adulterous wife. Chillingworth is, however, too deeply hurt and humiliated by her lover's deed to forgive him. He acts as a typical husband in a male-dominated patriarchal society and he does not want to be publicly reviled as a cuckolded husband. What becomes the goal of his life is to hunt the man who has sullied his honour as a husband and when Hester refuses to reveal the name of her paramour, Chillingworth is obsessed with the idea of hunting the man and punishing him. It is in the fourth chapter of the tale that there is a crucial exchange between Hester and her husband,

'why dost thou smile so at me?' inquired Hester, troubled at the expression of his eyes.  
'Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?'

'Not thy soul,' he answered, with another smile. 'No, not thine?' (p.98)

It is from this point onwards that Chillingworth ceases to be human and becomes an allegorical character. Hester wonders if her husband is the Black Man of the forest who traps man's soul into evil and leads him to damnation. The word "leech" that is used by the narrator to describe the physician is most appropriate. He clings to the priest like a leech, sucks his blood and gets a devilish pleasure when he sees the mysterious mark on his chest. When Hester urges him to forget and forgive and leave

punishment to God, Chillingworth tells her sternly, "I have no such power as thou tellest me. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer . . . It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!" (p.210). The old faith mentioned by Chillingworth, perhaps, refers to the Old Testament according to which the evil-doer must be punished. Retribution is the spirit that guides the physician and the New Testament spirit of forgiveness is alien to his make-up. Chillingworth is present in all the three scenes near the scaffold. In the first scaffold scene, he is a stranger standing near an Indian. In the second scaffold scene, he appears suddenly and leads Dimmesdale away. In the third and the last scaffold scene, he is utterly, humiliated and lost when the priest mounts the scaffold and publicly confesses his sin. His last spoken words are an index of his utter failure, "Thou hast escaped me!" (p.307). His life has been an utter failure. As he himself foreshadows it, the black flower has blossomed and ruined him as a husband and also as a physician. Instead of healing others, he injures them and also injures his own soul irreparably. The phrase "black flower" stands for evil and sums up Chillingworth's life and destiny. Of all the major characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, he is the only character who has a past but has no future. Before he dies, unknown, unnoticed, he does bestow his property on Pearl but it is too small a deed to redeem his soul.

## 8.5 PEARL

Pearl is a lovely, mischievous and naughty young child. She is a creature of impulse and is not amenable to rules. The narrator describes her as "a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion" (p.111). When Hester retires to the solitary cottage, Pearl is her only companion. She finds her daughter so wild and impulsive that she wonders whether Pearl is a human child. There is no peer group to socialise Pearl and she grows into a willful, obdurate young girl. Most of the time she plays alone and she is not much bothered by the hostility of the little Puritans in and around Boston. The narrator describes Hester's solitary daughter in these words, "Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world" (p.116). As Pearl grows up, wild and willful, Hester is disturbed by her mischievousness. There are also rumours floating in the community that Pearl is "a demon offspring" (p.122). Pearl's obsession with *The Scarlet Letter* on her mother's bosom also disturbs Hester and creates a sort of ambiguity in her response to her daughter. She loves Pearl and also dreads her inquisitiveness reflected in her bold, penetrating eyes. The narrator has described Hester's anxiety in these words, "It was as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just then peeped forth in mockery" (p.120).

It is in the scene in the Governor's house that Pearl's worth as a human being is fully reflected. When Reverend Wilson, the most venerable clergyman asks Pearl if she is a Christian child, Pearl replies frankly, "I am mother's child and my name is Pearl" (p.134). The Governor also asks Hester if she will be able to bring up Pearl properly. Hester's goal of life as a single parent is vividly expressed by the narrator, "I can teach my little Pearl what I have learned from this," answered Hester Prynne, laying her finger on the red token (p.135). The narrator makes it clear that even a fallen woman like Hester has rights, mother's rights to be precise. There is no wonder that Hester's right as a mother is fully vindicated by Arthur Dimmesdale and both the civil and the religious authority abandon their plan of separating Pearl from Hester. The narrator makes a pertinent point at the end of the scene in The Governor's House, "Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan's snares" (p.143).

It is clear that the responsibility of bringing up Pearl as a single parent gives a goal, a sense of purpose to Hester. It is in this sense that Pearl saves her from the temptation of Devil. In the forest scene also when Hester throws *The Scarlet Letter* away, it is Pearl who urges her to put *The Scarlet Letter* back on her bosom. Hester's daughter reminds her mother that *The Scarlet Letter* cannot be discarded. It is inseparable from

her destiny. Pearl plays a very crucial role in the forest scene and but for her insistence Hester would have forgotten her badge of shame and her cross. In the last scaffold scene also Pearl kisses Dimmesdale and plays a key role in the reunion of her father and mother in the market. She sheds tears as she kisses her father. The narrator's comment on Pearl's tears is revealing indeed, "They were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (p. 307).

As an infant and as a young girl, Pearl plays an important role in the unfolding of the narrative. She is both a symbol of beauty and a stern reminder of her mother's sin. It is not only Hester but Dimmesdale as well who feels uncomfortable in her presence. As a young woman, however, Pearl becomes the archetypal American young woman who is blessed by a fortune and also marries a noble of the Old World. While Hester returns to New England, Pearl goes back to the Old World. Her childhood is an integral part of the moral and spiritual drama unfolded in *The Scarlet Letter* but her youth and marriage remind us of the happy ending associated with fairy tales. It is also a glimpse of poetic justice that operates marginally in a dark, brooding world of mid-seventeenth century New England. Pearl is the only ray of hope in a world governed by Roger Chillingworth and Mistress Hibbins.

## 8.6 MINOR CHARACTERS

We have already told you that the minor characters are products of history and locate the drama of sin and redemption in a specific time and place. Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins are among the significant minor characters. Both Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham are present in the first scaffold scene. It is Reverend Wilson, the eldest clergyman in Boston, who urges Hester to name her lover. Later on, he requests Arthur Dimmesdale to put pressure on Hester to confess her sin and declare the name of her partner in the sin of adultery. When Dimmesdale's efforts did not bear fruit, Reverend Wilson delivers a sermon admonishing unrepentant sinners. He warns both Hester and the community present near the scaffold of the danger of being tapped by Devil. It has, however, no effect on Hester who, after her ordeal before the scaffold, goes back to the prison. The narrator draws our attention to the folk belief in mid-seventeenth century New England, "It was whispered by those who peered after her that *The Scarlet Letter* threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-ways of the interior" (p.89).

In the scene at the Governor's house we find that Governor Bellingham and Reverend Wilson are together and it is Reverend Wilson who is given the chance to interrogate Hester and Pearl. It is clear that the Head of the church and the Head of the state worked together and as far as Hester's conscience is concerned it is Reverend Wilson who is entrusted with the sole responsibility of chastising Hester and her unruly child. One can conclude that the state in New England was a kind of theocracy and there was no separation of civil authority and religious authority. Following the lead by Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham also wants to know if Hester would be able to bring up her child as a sober, disciplined Puritan. He also urges Reverend Wilson to find out if Pearl is being brought up in a proper religious atmosphere. It is clear that Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham work with perfect understanding. It has also to be noted that when Dimmesdale defends Hester's right as a mother, both Reverend Wilson and Governor Bellingham show an open mind, and in spite of their reservations about Hester, agree to give a trial to Dimmesdale's suggestion to let Hester bring up Pearl.

Mistress Hibbins is a witch-lady who is supposed to be an agent and emissary of Devil. There is a conversation between Hester and Mistress Hibbins at the end of the scene in Governor's house and she urges her to come to the forest and sign a pact with Devil. Hester, however, does not fall in the trap set by Mistress Hibbins. The witch-lady is

also present in the Governor's house during the second scaffold scene. When Dimesdale shrieks at midnight, he feels that the whole town will awake and find him with Hester and Pearl. The narrator has made it clear, "The town did not awake; or, if it did, the drowsy slumberers mistook the cry either for something frightful in a dream, or for the noise of witches, whose voices, at that period, were often heard to pass over the settlements or lonely cottages, as they rode with Satan through the air" (p. 180). It is clear that Mistress Hibbins is not only an allegorical character but is also a product of the folk imagination in colonial New England. There is no doubt that Mistress Hibbins is an authentic product of the folk belief in mid-seventeenth century New England. There is a touch of legend about Mistress Hibbins who is definitely a throwback to the remote past. She belongs to a past that is dark, mysterious and irrational.

### 8.7 LET US SUM UP

Chillingworth represents science, Hester art, Dimesdale religion and Pearl nature. Pearl, Hester and Dimesdale also foreshadow "Id," "Ego," and "Super-ego." Hester and Chillingworth stand for Eros and Thanatos.

Hester, Dimesdale, Pearl and Chillingworth are major characters and Reverend Wilson, Governor Bellingham and Mistress Hibbins constitute minor characters. While the major characters are multi-dimensional and undergo subtle transformations, the minor characters are rather flat and one-dimensional. While the major characters act and interact to create a moving drama of sin and redemption, the minor characters locate the tale in mid-seventeenth century New England.

The characters have been developed largely through allegory and symbols. They are far from realistic.

### 8.8 QUESTIONS

1. "While Hester is the unrepentant sinner, Dimesdale is the half-repentant sinner and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner." Is it a fair assessment of the three major characters in *The Scarlet Letter*?
2. Do you agree with the view that Pearl saves Hester from the temptation of Devil?
3. Compare and contrast Reverend Wilson with Governor Bellingham.
4. "It is remarkable that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.199). Examine the ups and downs of Hester in the light of the statement quoted above.
5. Write a note on Mistress Hibbins, the witch-lady.
6. Bring out the importance of the minor characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. How are they related to the major characters?
7. Why does Pearl migrate to the old World? Why does Hester return to her cottage in New England?

8. "Let the black flower blossom as it may!" *The Scarlet Letter*, p.210. Examine the ups and downs of Roger Chillingworth in the light of the statement cited.
9. "He hath proved His mercy, most of all, in my afflictions" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 308). Make an assessment of Dimmesdale in the light of the statement cited. How are the past and the future entwined both in Hester and Dimmesdale?
11. Why is Hester compared to a non-conformist like Ann Hutchinson? Is it appropriate to describe her as a radical woman?

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## 8.9 SUGGESTED READING

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1. *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient* by Luther S. Luedtke. (Indiana University Press, 1989).
2. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter* by David Levin, included in *The American Novel* ed. Wallace Stegner. (New York: Basic Books, 1965).
3. *Primitive Strength in Hawthorne's Women* by Kristin Herzog, included in *Women, Ethnicity, and Exotics*. (The University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

# UNIT 9 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND STRUCTURE

## Structure

9.0	Objectives
9.1	Introduction
9.2	Symmetrical Design
9.3	Form and Content
9.4	Open-endedness
9.5	Let Us Sum Up
9.6	Suggested Reading

## 9.0 OBJECTIVES

We have already told you that the narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* is quite complicated. It encompasses both action and commentary. The commentary is through a narrator, projected in the Introduction, who examines the past from the point of view of a nineteenth century observer. Even the supernatural and the folk beliefs of mid-seventeenth century New England are subjected to the narrator's incisive irony and scepticism. In this unit we will also give you an idea of the symmetrical design, form and content and open-endedness of the text.

## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

*The Scarlet Letter* is a carefully designed work of fiction in which the supernatural, the marvelous, and the strange have been artistically fused. Although Hawthorne considered himself a romancer rather than a novelist, he also admitted the well-made novel in which the incidents and scenes are arranged in a symmetrical order, leading to a profound concentration and intensification of meaning. F.O. Matthiessen has rightly observed that Hawthorne has developed in *The Scarlet Letter* his most coherent plot (Norton Critical Edition, p.279). It is the result of beginning the tale with a scaffold scene and also rounding the tale with a scaffold scene near the end. There is also a scaffold scene right in the middle of the tale. There is no wonder that the scaffold of the pillory comes to acquire a hallowed status for the three major characters in the romance-novel.

While F.O. Matthiessen looks at the structure of the romance-novel in terms of the sequencing of the scaffold scenes, with the second scaffold scene showing Dimmesdale in Chillingworth's grip. John C. Gerber makes a four-fold division of *The Scarlet Letter*. In chapters I-VIII, it is the community in Boston that initiates the action and the main characters simply suffer the action. While Chillingworth dominates the action in chapters XI-XII, Hester dominates the action in chapters XIII-XX. It is Dimmesdale, the priest, who dominates the action in chapters XXI-XXIV. According to Gerber's analysis, it is the community--and the state--in Boston that sets the tune and later on Chillingworth, Hester and Dimmesdale seize the initiative. The thrust of the narrative is to show how the community creates a challenging situation and how the major characters respond to the challenge. The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* shows both the authority of the community and the state and also the resilience and resourcefulness of the major characters like Chillingworth, Hester and Dimmesdale. Thus, the form and content are dextrously dovetailed in the romance-novel.



There is also a kind of openness of the text because of the use of the device of multiple choice by the narrator who looks upon the incidents and events of mid-seventeenth century New England from the ironic and sceptical perspective of a mid-nineteenth century observer. You could recall the narrator's comment on the meteor during the second scaffold scene at midnight and also on Dimmesdale's baring of his chest in the last scaffold scene. While the incidents are visualised in all their awe and mystery, the narrator's voice is ironic and sceptical. It is the narrator's voice that makes the superstitions and folk beliefs of mid-seventeenth century colonial New England somewhat credible to a reader of our time.

### 9.2 SYMMETRICAL DESIGN

If the three scaffold scenes provide a kind of narrative focus on the drama of sin and redemption in colonial New England, the scenes around the lonely cottage and the forest liberate Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl from the clutches of the stern Puritanic Old World. While the scaffold scenes show that a natural life of passion and joy was just not possible in mid-seventeenth century New England, the forest scenes show that a natural life of passion and joy was quite possible for the major characters like Hester and Dimmesdale. While the scaffold scenes are dramatic and sombre, the forest scenes are lyrical and romantic. It is through a subtle inter-weaving of the scaffold scenes and the forest scenes, the dramatic and the lyrical, that the complex narrative structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is created.

It has to be noted, however, that even in the romantic scenes in the forest, the sinister shadow of Chillingworth is not entirely absent. It is in the forest that Hester tells Dimmesdale that the old man, Chillingworth, has been her husband. It is in the forest that Hester throws away *The Scarlet Letter* and realises her dream to be free. It is in the forest that Pearl refuses to accept her mother till she puts on the badge of shame and dishonour on her bosom. It is in the forest that Hester puts on her cap over her lovely, flowing hair and her past. It is in the forest that Hester realises that she cannot undo and becomes appropriately subdued and sedate as a nun. It is true that the scaffold scenes and the forest scenes, by and large, convey the contrary outlooks of conformity, order and submission to divine will on the one hand, and individualism, rebellion and assertion of human will on the other hand. The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is so artfully designed that the forest scenes and the scaffold scenes interpenetrate and create an absorbing drama in which the sacred and the profane are inextricably fused. There is no wonder that a radical critic like D.H. Lawrence finds in the romance-novel "a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy" (Richard Chase, p.9). Needless to add that the morality is embedded in the scaffold scenes and the passion in the forest scenes. One can look at the tale from the point of view of Dimmesdale and one can also look at the tale from the point of view of Hester. While for Dimmesdale their sexual relationship was a sin, for Hester it was a celebration of the erotic impulse. It is in this sense that the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses both the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the carnal, the divine and the demonic.

### 9.3 FORM AND CONTENT

In his perceptive essay "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*" John C. Gerber has looked at the structure of the romance-novel in a different manner. Instead of focussing on the binary contrast between the forest scenes and the scaffold scenes, Gerber divides the romance-novel into four distinct clusters of scenes. Each cluster has

a distinct activating agent. The critic is of the view, "Thus the community, aside from the main characters, is responsible for the action in the first part (chapters I-VIII); Chillingworth for that in the second (XI-XII); Hester for that in the third (XIII-XX); and Dimmesdale for that in the fourth (XXI-XXIV)" (Norton Critical Edition, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.284). The focus of the narrative in the first part is on the people in Boston. Apart from the church and the state, the common people also react to the basic situation unfolded. The reactions of the women in the market are very revealing. One old woman of fifty says that the authorities have been very lenient to Hester. They should have imposed on her a more stern punishment. Another one says that Hester's forehead should have been branded with a hot iron. When a young woman shows sympathy towards Hester, there is another one who says that "This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.70).

The nature of the community and the state is sharply brought out in the first part of the romance-novel. While the narrative creates an antipathy towards the Puritan community in Boston, it also creates sympathy towards Hester and Pearl. The scene in the Governor's House marks the end of this phase of the narrative. Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth play a crucial role in this scene. While Dimmesdale defends Hester's right to bring up Pearl, Chillingworth wonders why the priest advocates her case so vehemently. From this point one can see a smooth transition to the second part of the tale in which Chillingworth plays a crucial role. In this section, Dimmesdale is helpless and Chillingworth plays the role of the hunter. It is Dimmesdale's helplessness against the hunter that leads to Hester's activating role in the forest scenes, chapters XIII-XX. In the fourth section of the tale, Dimmesdale's Election Sermon and confession are the direct outcome of his being rejuvenated by Hester in the forest. In keeping with the nature of the romance-novel, both Dimmesdale and Hester are also used as the instrument of a prophecy. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* becomes a kind of dialogue between the past and the future. It encompasses both the terrible burden of the past and the immense possibilities of the life in the future.

### 9.4 OPEN-ENDEDNESS

We have told you that the text of *The Scarlet Letter* has the capacity to encompass diametrically opposite and conflicting outlooks. While for Dimmesdale the sexual relationship between Hester and the priest was a sin, for Hester, "What we did, had a consecration of its own" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.236). One can look at the tale as a drama of sin and redemption. One can also look at the tale as a love story and on Hester as an Oriental, a pagan. While the scaffold scenes are grim and sombre, the forest scenes are, by and large, lyrical and joyous. The juxtaposition of opposite and conflicting outlooks, the piety and the passion, creates an open-endedness in the text. Focussing on the ambiguity of the text, Sacvan Bercovitch says, "It entails a sustained open-ended tension between fundamentally conflicting outlooks" (*The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, p.25). It is a fact that the narrator, by and large, presents the tale of mid-seventeenth century New England from the ironic and sceptical perspective of a nineteenth century observer. There is no wonder that in the first scaffold scene, Hester is described by the narrator through an intensely Catholic image of Virgin Mary. *The Scarlet Letter* which is a badge of sin and shame appears to Indians as a symbol of a personage of high dignity among her people" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.296). Later on, even to the Puritans of Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* ceases to be a badge of sin and damnation and becomes holy as the cross on a nun's bosom. One can safely affirm that the narrator's voice through irony and diverse images creates a sort of polyphony. The community in Boston that is initially so hostile to Hester's defiant radicalism, eventually accepts her as a holy nun.

There are gaps and silences in the text. When Dimmesdale returns from the forest, he is a rejuvenated man. He is full of energy and a vision. In his Election Sermon he visualises a glorious future for the Republic in New England. After he makes his

1. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tradition and Revolution* by Charles Swann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
2. *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, by Sacvan Bercovitch (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).
3. "Hawthorne in Our Time" from *Beyond Culture* by Lionel Trilling (Oxford University Press, 1980).
4. "The Romances" from Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Truth of Dreams* by Rita K. Gollin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).
5. *Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies* by Michael Dunne (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1995).
6. *The American Historical Romance* by George Dekker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
7. *The Scarlet Letter* by F.O. Matthiessen and "Form and Content in *The Scarlet Letter*" by John C. Gerber included in Norton Critical Edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, 1961. (Strongly recommended.)

## 9.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

The narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* encompasses both action and commentary. The commentary is from the perspective of a mid-nineteenth century observer of the life in colonial New England.

The symmetry of the narrative design is due to the three scaffold scenes at the beginning, the middle and the end. They hold the scenes together. While the scaffold scenes are grim, sombre and dramatic the forest scenes are lively, bright and lyrical. While the scaffold scenes are charged with piety, the forest scenes are charged with passion.

The narrative generates a kind of dialogue between the past and the future. There is also a kind of open-endedness embedded in the text.

## 9.5 LET US SUM UP

Even Hester's radicalism is subject to the narrator's irony and scepticism.

confession, he is completely debilitated. He collapses suddenly and dies in the arms of Hester. It is difficult to understand that a man who returns from the forest completely rejuvenated becomes so weak after his confession. It can only be taken as a mystery of life. Perhaps, the burst of energy after he returns from the forest could be taken as the last flicker of a dying candle. There is no doubt that the text is open-ended and could be interpreted differently. Hester becomes pious as a nun towards the end of the tale yet the narrator's voice is sceptical as ever, "Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow" (p.315).

## UNIT 10 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

### Structure

10.0	Objectives
10.1	Introduction
10.2	Nineteenth Century Response
10.3	Modern Response
10.4	Contemporary Response
10.5	Let Us Sum Up
10.6	Glossary
10.7	A Select Bibliography

## 10.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the shifting critical responses to *The Scarlet Letter* from the nineteenth century to the contemporary time. A classic like *The Scarlet Letter* has been interpreted differently in different times.

## 10.1 INTRODUCTION

In nineteenth century it was Henry James, himself a distinguished American master of fiction, who set the tone of a qualified approval of *The Scarlet Letter*. On the one hand, James admired the work as an authentic portrayal of New England Puritanism in all its specific colour. On the other hand, he was also critical of its excessive allegory and symbolism and an absence of realism that was so triumphant all over Europe. Even major realist novelists like Anthony Trollope and William Dean Howells admired the tragic intensity of *The Scarlet Letter* but could not really understand "why Hawthorne could lean so heavily on the fantastic, the supernatural, the symbolic, and the allegorical and yet create a sense of truth as strong as in any realistic novel" (*The Scarlet Letter*, A Reading by Nina Baym, p. xxv).

It was, however, a twentieth century critic like Richard Chase who could differentiate Nathaniel Hawthorne from the realistic writers of the novel in the nineteenth century and describe *The Scarlet Letter* as a romance or a romance-novel, that is a novel with a strong element of romance, supernatural and the marvellous. F.O. Matthiessen was another important twentieth century critic who could discern a formal coherence and unity in the sequencing of the three scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*. D.H. Lawrence was a radical critic and thinker who could see a kind of duplicity in the romantic tale in which the celebration of passion nearly destroys the world of piety that the puritanic imagination of the writer has so meticulously created.

The contemporary critics like Michael Dunne, Sacvan Bercovitch, Charles Swann and Nina Baym look at *The Scarlet Letter* as an open-ended text in which there is a recurrent dialogue between the past and the future. While the Puritan utopia that was established in mid-seventeenth century New England with so much hope is sharply negated by the thrust of the narrative, a kind of feminist utopia is obliquely visualised by the narrator. It is the many-sidedness of the text that forces the reader to interpret the tale differently. There is no wonder that the ambiguity of the narrative is forcefully brought out by the contemporary critics.

## 10.2 NINETEENTH CENTURY RESPONSE

*The Scarlet Letter*, according to Nina Baym in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* was "recognized as a classic even before publication" (p. xxi). The original intention of Hawthorne had been to publish the work as a loose collection of short tales. It was James T. Field, one of the three partners in the firm that published Hawthorne's works, who read the manuscript and urged the hesitant author to publish it as a single work. Field agreed with Hawthorne that the work was "not a mixture of bright and dark, sunshine and shadow, humor and pathos as the taste of the time preferred" (p. xxi). In reality, Hawthorne's tale was a product of his brooding imagination and was "intense and single in its stress on the dark, the somber, the gloomy" (p. xxi). Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick* also referred to Hawthorne's brooding, melancholy imagination, "this great power of blackness is derived from that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free" (Richard Chase, p. 89).

After its publication, various critics responded to *The Scarlet Letter* in different ways. While admitting that it was a most powerful but painful story, Henry Chorley drew our attention to the fantastic and the supernatural in the tale, "The touch of the fantastic befitting a period of society in which ignorant and excitable human creatures conceived each other and themselves to be under the direct rule and governance of the wicked one, is most skillfully administered. The supernatural here never becomes grossly palpable--the thrill is all the deeper for its action being indefinite, and its source vague and distant" (*Critics on Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas J. Rountree, pp. 18-19). What Henry Chorley suggested was that the use of the fantastic and the supernatural was done in a most judicious and artistic manner in order to bring out the strange life in mid-seventeenth century New England in all its primitive and specific particularity. In other words, it was the use of the fantastic and the supernatural that made Hawthorne's sombre romance authentic and credible. Leslie Stephen also drew attention to the use of the marvellous in Hawthorne's romance, "In fact Hawthorne was able to tread in that magic circle [of the marvellous] only by an exquisite refinement of taste, and by a delicate sense of humor, which is the best preservative against all extravagance" (*ibid.*, p. 26).

Anthony Trollope was a major Victorian writer who wrote novels in the realistic mode. He was, however, perceptive enough to discern that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* belonged to an altogether different tradition of fiction, "The creations of American literature generally are no doubt more given to the speculative--less given to the realistic--than are those of English literature. . . . But in no American writer is to be found the same predominance of weird imagination as in Hawthorne" (*ibid.*, p. 28). It is this strange and brooding imagination of Hawthorne that enabled him to look at the institutions and individuals of mid-seventeenth century New England from the perspective of an outsider, "In this, however, there is a streak of that satire with which Hawthorne always speaks of the peculiar institutions of his own country. The worthy magistrates of Massachusetts are under his lash throughout the story, and so is the virtue of her citizens and the easiness of her matrons, which can take delight in the open shame of a woman whose sin has been discovered. Indeed, there is never a page written by Hawthorne not tinged by satire" (*ibid.*, p. 29).

It was Henry James who made an attempt to include Hawthorne in the canon and described him as the foremost American master of fiction, "To talk of his being national would be to force the note and make a mistake of proportion; but he is, in spite of the absence of the realistic quality, intensely and vividly local" (*ibid.*, p. 38). Henry James could notice the paradox of Hawthorne's fictional art. There was an absence of realism, that is an elaborate and comprehensive depiction of incidents of everyday life, and yet *The Scarlet Letter* could present the life of colonial New England in all its

starkness and specificity. It is Hawthorne's ability to evoke the life and folk beliefs of the city of Boston in colonial New England that made him the foremost American writer of his time. It is true that Henry James was critical of the absence of realism in Hawthorne and he also lamented the excess of allegory and symbolism in the unfolding of the narrative. He also suggested, like Anthony Trollope, that, "He is to a considerable degree ironical--this is part of his charm--part even one may say, of his brightness; but he is neither bitter nor cynical--he is rarely even what I should call tragical" (*ibid.*, p.40). It is the reader's inability to perceive the irony in Hawthorne's narrative art that makes the tale appear so morbid and gloomy. True, there is gloom and melancholy as the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* is unfolded but it is, to some extent, countered by the narrator's irony and scepticism. Even in the most intense scene, for example, the last scaffold scene, the note of irony is unmistakable.

### 10.3 MODERN RESPONSE

It was in the twentieth century that *The Scarlet Letter* was seen as a product of a native tradition of American fiction. Richard Chase suggested in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* that "romance, rather than the novel, was the pre-destined form of American narrative" (p.18). A romance was preoccupied more with the marvellous and the supernatural but it also was faithful to what Hawthorne himself described as "the truth of the human heart" (p.18). F.O. Matthiessen looked at *The Scarlet Letter* in terms of the structure of a tale that had a symmetry of design. The symmetry resulted from the sequencing of the highly dramatic scenes near the scaffold of the pillory where all the major characters were present. These scenes were located at the beginning, the middle and the end of the tale (Norton Critical edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, p.279). In other words, there was a classical unity of design in the structure of the romance designed by Hawthorne.

While keeping in mind the modernist temper F.O. Matthiessen focussed attention on the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* and the importance of the three scaffold scenes. Yvor Winters laid stress on the strange nature of the fiction created by Hawthorne. He said, "In *The Scarlet Letter*, then, Hawthorne created a great allegory; or, if we look first at the allegorical view of life upon which early Puritan society was based, we might almost say that he composed a great historical novel" (*Critics On Hawthorne*, p.64). A critic like Charles Fiedelson, Jr. was of the view that allegory and symbolism were often in conflict in *The Scarlet Letter*. He said, "The symbolistic and the allegorical patterns in Hawthorne's books reach quite different conclusions; or, rather, the symbolism leads to an inconclusive luxuriance of meaning, while allegory imposes the pat moral and the simplified character" (p.66).

We have already told you that *The Scarlet Letter* A is initially visualised as the badge of a sinful woman but later on it becomes a rich symbol of a noble nun and a compassionate woman. In other words, while allegory has a more or less definite meaning, a symbol has a host of associations clinging to it. It was a critic like Q.D. Leavis who could look upon Hawthorne as a poet rather than an allegorist, "And if much of Hawthorne's writing is allegorical, it is in the manner of Shakespeare--the Shakespeare of the tragedies . . . each of which may be regarded as an expanded metaphor--rather than in the style of Spenser, Milton or Bunyan" (*Collected Essays*, Vol.2, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.3). The difficulty of a final interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter* arises from the symbolical and metaphorical density of the text.

In her celebrated essay "Hawthorne as Poet" Q.D. Leavis looks upon Hawthorne as a leading cultural critic of his time. She says, "Hawthorne was writing a kind of mythic prophecy about the great cultural change involved in the shift from the Old World to the New" (Richard Chase, p.75). It has to be noted that both Hester and Dimmesdale had eventually planned to escape to the Old World but later on they changed their plan and stuck to the New World. D.H. Lawrence was a radical thinker who could see in

Hawthorne "a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy" (Richard Chase, p.9). What D.H. Lawrence was suggesting is that there was a split in Hawthorne's mind. He was both a Puritan like Dimmesdale and a pagan like Hester. *The Scarlet Letter* was both a drama of sin and redemption and a celebration of romantic love. It could be read from a sacred perspective and it could also be read simultaneously from a secular perspective.

## 10.4 CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE

Rita K. Gollin has laid stress on daydreams that Hester has in the first scaffold scene, and Dimmesdale has during the second scaffold scene at midnight. The reverse or daydream helps them to come to terms with the consequences of their sexual encounter. Rita K. Gollin is able to draw a line of demarcation between the function of the daydream in the life of the two main protagonists in *The Scarlet Letter*, "Hester's daydream establishes her character, and Dimmesdale's explores his dilemma" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Truth of Dreams*, p.141). Since Hawthorne's romance is not only a historical romance but a psychological romance as well, the writer has made a judicious use of dreams in order to portray the inner reality of the protagonist's mind. Lionel Trilling draws our attention to the similarity between Hawthorne and Kafka, "There is a very considerable degree of similarity in their preoccupations--man's dark odyssey in an alien world' may serve to describe Kafka's as well as Hawthorne's "Hawthorne in Our Time" from *Beyond Culture*, p.171). Lionel Trilling also points out, "Then too, having in mind Kafka's negation of the world of actuality, I think it can fairly be said that there is something comparable in the way that Hawthorne deals with the world. He encourages the comparison when he tells us that he does not write novels but romances, by which he means that his fiction does not make a very determined reference to the concrete substantialities of life, the observation and imitation of which is the definitive business of novels" (p.171). We would like you to remember the key phrase "negation of the world of actuality." That is, at the heart of Hawthorne's creativity in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Terence Martin has drawn our attention to the ambivalent nature of reality portrayed in Hawthorne's masterpiece, "In *The Scarlet Letter*, however, Hawthorne sustains a vision of the ambivalent nature of reality beyond all he had done before and in a way he was never to do again. Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, *The Scarlet Letter* itself--all signify more than one thing; all must be considered in more than one way" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, p.117). While Terence Martin lays stress on the many-sidedness of Hawthorne's sombre tale, Kristin Herzog lays stress on the subaltern and the marginal groups that fill the canvas in *The Scarlet Letter*, "The *Scarlet Letter* is a story set up at the rough edge of civilization. The dark forest is still ominously near, and the dark dangers from foreign servants, untamed children, stubborn heretics, idle Indians, or hell-bound witches seem to threaten the Puritan civilization's sacred new orders" (*Women, Ethnicity and Exotics*, p.7). If you want to appreciate the extraordinary richness of the text, you have to keep in mind not only the Puritan ethos but also the voice of the subaltern and the marginal groups, that is the Indians, the witches and the Quakers and heretics. There is indeed a polyphony of voices in *The Scarlet Letter*. Kristin Herzog has rightly affirmed, "American literature gained strength whenever it drew on the power of the powerless" (p.189).

George Dekker lays emphasis on the fact that the American Historical romance is a genre that shows a preoccupation with the past. He is of the view that there are time and place markers in *The Scarlet Letter* and when we look at a character like Governor Bellingham he appears as an anachronistic figure to the readers of our time (*The American Historical Romance*, p.15). Luther S. Luedtke is of the view, "The problem of *The Scarlet Letter* is really the problem of how to interpret Hester" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient*, p.165). In other words, the real significance of *The Scarlet Letter* lies in our ability to look at the pagan and oriental

nature of Hester and also in our ability to look upon her as the most radical woman of nineteenth century American fiction. Nina Baym is also of the view that Hester is the core of the romance, not Dimmesdale.

Charles Swann is nearly of the same view, "she is genuinely subversive in that she desires and prophesies a radical subversion of the patriarchal structures of the society and, most significantly, of the religion that legitimates that patriarchy" (*Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tradition and Revolution*, pp.90-91). He is also of the view that the narrative form resists closure. It remains deliberately open--open to the future (p.94). Charles Swann sums up his evaluation of Hawthorne's masterpiece in these words, "*The Scarlet Letter* is a historical novel--one which takes past, present and future into consideration--and is at the same time political in that the future is presented as something that we have to struggle to make--a making based on desire corrected by our perspectives on the past" (p.95).

Sacvan Bercovitch lays stress on the gaps and silences in the text and we do not really understand why Hester Prynne returns to Boston after Pearl's settlement in the Old World. He is also of the view that Hawthorne's imagination has something of Bakhtin's dialogic imagination. Bercovitch says, "Dialogics is the process by which a singular authorial vision unfolds as a 'polyphony' of distinct voices" (*The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, p.24). Michael Dunne also draws our attention towards open-endedness of the text of *The Scarlet Letter* (*Hawthorne's Narrative Strategies*, p. 19). There is no wonder that the reader has to read the text with utmost care and judgement.

If one were to sum up the contemporary relevance of *The Scarlet Letter* one could do no better than quote Nina Baym, "Perhaps, then, the most exciting thing about *The Scarlet Letter* is not that we can translate it into a core meaning, but that it is full of meanings; though a dead work if it is not read, it comes to life for each reader in a slightly different way, just as human beings do for each other. The elusiveness of the text is thus the essential reason for its continuous fascination throughout the years" (*The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*, p.xxix).

## 10.5 LET US SUM UP

In the nineteenth century *The Scarlet Letter* was evaluated in terms of a realistic work of fiction. As such, critics felt that there was an excess of allegory and symbolism in the romantic tale.

It was in the twentieth century that *The Scarlet Letter* was evaluated in terms of its structure based on a sequence of the three scaffold scenes that encompassed the romantic scenes in the forest. It was also seen as a romance--novel in which allegory and symbolism played such a crucial role.

The contemporary critics could discern a kind of dialogic imagination informing the text. The past and the future were embedded in the text inextricably. Each reader has to recreate the text in the light of his or her own experience, keeping in mind both the dominant voice and also the voices of the subaltern, marginal groups in colonial New England.

## 10.6 GLOSSARY

Dialogic imagination is a key concept developed by Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. It enables a writer to present more or less simultaneously concepts which were opposites and could not be reconciled in terms of reason. Novels using this technique use multiple voices called polyphony. *The Scarlet Letter* brings out the opposing views of Dimmesdale and Hester on their sexual union.



10.7 A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**

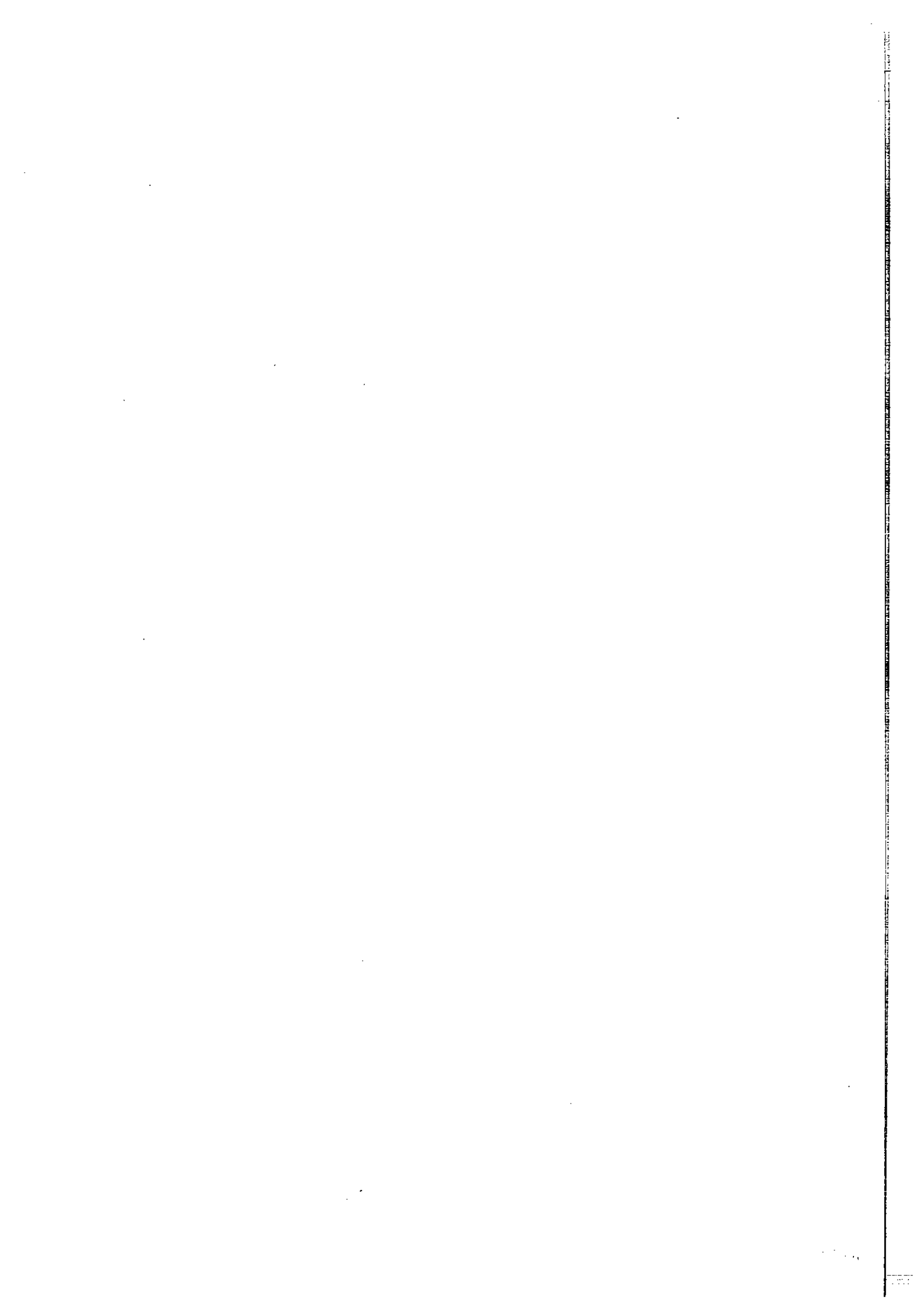
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Block

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This is the second novel of 19th century America that you have to study as part of your course on American literature. If Hawthorne questions puritanism in *The Scarlet Letter*, Mark Twain interrogates the meaning of freedom and slavery in the context of the slave-holding society of the South in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

The block is meant to enable you to study, analyze and evaluate the novel which though rooted in its time and place has appealed to readers over more than a century all over the world. It is also meant to facilitate you to switch over to the study of *The Bluest Eye* by the foremost African American novelist writing today, namely, Toni Morrison.

The study material is divided into five units. Unit 1 gives background information on the author and his work and relates it to the rise of realism in the American novel. It also talks about contemporary attitudes to slavery in 19th century America. Unit 2 focuses on a study of the narrative and the structure of the novel. Unit 3 is meant to discuss the themes and the principal characters namely Huck and Jim, tracing their origin to Twain's childhood experiences. Unit 4 is devoted exclusively to his innovative use of dialect in the novel. Unit 5 deals with humor and intertextuality and with the important issue of perceived racism in the book and closes with a summary of major critical approaches to it.



## UNIT 11 BACKGROUND TO ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

### Structure

11.0	Objectives
11.1	Introduction
11.2	Key Questions
11.3	How to study this Study Material
11.4	American Society during 1865-1914
11.5	Mark Twain
11.5.1	Chronology of Important Dates
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11.5.3	A Note on Mark Twain's writings
11.6	Negro Slavery in America
11.6.1	A historical View
11.6.2	Mark Twain and Slavery
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11.6.4	American Fiction: The Rise of Realism
11.7	Let Us Sum Up
11.8	Glossary
11.9	Questions
11.10	Further Reading

## 11.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit has a bifocal objective: it aims to put Mark Twain's novel in the sociocultural context of 19th century America, and it will direct your attention to some of the contradictions and questions that have been raised around the novel in the hundred years of its publication.

## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

I should like to begin this study of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by referring to three contradictory things about the novel. These are:

i) The novel was described by no less a writer than Hemingway as being 'the source of all modern American literature.' Yet the book on its first publication in the US was banished from Concord Public Library as being the "veriest trash," (as having "no reliable sense of propriety" as "rough, coarse and inelegant" . . . more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people."

ii) *Huckleberry Finn* is now an acknowledged classic that has been filmed no less than six times, televised and turned into a strip cartoon and an opera. Huck's journey on a raft down the Mississippi in the company of a runaway slave has become legendary. But the ending of the novel has been found wanting and has caused considerable discussion among critics with Lionel Trilling and T.S. Eliot joining in the debate. So much so that a spoof of it has been done under the title *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1970) by John Seelye. In the introduction to the book, Huck tells us that one twentieth century "critic" said that the book [*Huckleberry Finn*] was sloppily put

1. The first thing of course is to read the novel at least twice. The first reading will give you an overall idea of the story and of what happens where. It is only in the second reading that characters and events start falling into place and a pattern begins to emerge.
2. Reading of the background material should come at this stage but please feel free to adopt any other method to suit your convenience. Only remember, your prime focus should be on the text.
3. You will be well advised to make jottings as you go along with your reading of the text or criticism.
4. Since every novel is a product of its time, you need to place *Huckleberry Finn* in the socio-cultural context of 19th century America. *Huckleberry Finn*

### 11.3 HOW TO USE THIS STUDY MATERIAL

Ponder each of the questions as you read the novel. We shall discuss these in the course of the study material.

These are some of the questions that you could ask yourself as you read the novel. And there will no doubt be others that you will find yourself asking.

- i) Do you think it is merely a children's book? Does it raise issues that are likely to be of interest to adults? What are they?
- ii) How do you account for the immense popularity of the book?
- iii) Do you find the novel's morality offensive or subversive in anyway? Think of specific issues.
- iv) Do you think the novel has a flawed ending? In what way?
- v) And lastly, do you think that it is a racist book? More precisely, how have Hick and Jim been represented in the novel?

Let me reformulate some of these issues:

### 11.2 KEY QUESTIONS

The debate for and against allowing young people free access to *Huckleberry Finn* has been fictionalized in Nat Hentoff in his book *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* (1982) on grounds of racism, sexism and immorality.

As you see, these apparent contradictions take you right into the heart of the novel and touch upon many of the issues that have exercised the mind of readers about it in recent times. The book is very much alive and its 'adventures' continue.

iii) The novel has long been known as an anti-racist book with Mark Twain's sympathies lying on the side of Jim. But recently the book has been denounced as being "racist" because of Huck's frequent and apparently unthinking use of the word 'nigger' for Jim. As a result there have been demands by some African Americans that the book be withdrawn from the school curriculum. The wheel has apparently come full circle.

together and so he decided to pick up the parts - the good ones - and put together one they would like. Huck goes on to say: "... now that they've got their book, maybe they'll leave the other one alone."

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5. The text of the novel used in this Study Material is that given in the Cambridge University Press edition edited by Jane Ogborn in the Cambridge Literature series, published in 1995. All references to the text will be indicated by both the chapter number and the page number to facilitate reference.
5. *Finn* though published in 1885 deals with a period "forty or fifty years ago," which means that it depicts a period before the American North clashed with the South in the Civil War of 1861-65, fought principally over the issue of slavery and states' rights. Slavery which is a most important focus in the novel had been abolished almost 20 years before (in 1865) the novel was published in the US. But abolition of slavery did not mean the disappearance of attitudes that were associated with it.

Background

- Between the end of the Civil War (1865) and World War I, American society witnessed several momentous changes. These were:
1. Perhaps the single most important change took place as a result of massive industrialization. From a rural, agrarian isolated republic consisting largely of farms, villages and small towns, America became in the course of 5 decades an industrialized, urbanized and continental nation, a world power that had come to terms with Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest and with profound changes in its cultural values and social institutions.
  2. With industrialization came the growth of American cities. By the turn of the century only about one-third of the population lived on farms.
  3. By the end of World War I one half of the American population lived in a dozen or so cities.
  4. The country's population grew phenomenally from 31 million in 1860 to 131 million in 1940 with masses of men moving westward. The exodus reached its peak during 1860-1920. American emigration agents tempted Europeans with promise of free land for the taking and offered to transport them to the Dollar land for as little as thirty-five dollars.
  5. Control over industries passed into the hands of fewer and larger companies. In the last two decades of the 19th century, a very small number of men controlled steel, railroad, oil and meat packing industries without significant competition. With these came a new generation of captains of industry and masters of capital. These men were also called buccaneers and robber barons.
  6. Most of the wage earners were employed by corporations and big business houses.
  7. The massive industrialization resulted in widespread prosperity but the prosperity was achieved at great social and psychological cost.
  8. Industrial conflicts became organized and often violent.
  9. Racial slavery had been abolished as a result of Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation. But the attitudes associated with it survived.

To an extent they still do. For details of events, books and persons connected with slavery in the US in the 19th century, please read Section 6 of this Unit.

10. The post-Civil War America does not figure prominently in Mark Twain's novels except in *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), which he wrote in collaboration with C.D. Warner. Both *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) are set in the pre-Civil War period, an era he was inclined to idealize. In both he goes back to his childhood memories. But so far as *Huckleberry Finn* is concerned, the question is: does this idealization apply to Twain's handling of the black-white relationship in the novel?

## 11.5 MARK TWAIN

### 11.5.1 Chronology of Important Dates

- 1835 (November 30) born Florida, Missouri
- 1839 The Clemens family moves to Hannibal, Missouri.
- 1847 Father, John Marshall Clemens died
- 1848-54 Worked as printer on various Hannibal newspapers.
- 1855-57 Worked as printer in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, etc.
- 1857-61 Cub-pilot and pilot on Missouri steamboats
- 1861-62 Prospector in Nevada



Sam Clemens, printer's apprentice, 1850.  
 (Courtesy *The Mark Twain Papers*,  
 The Bancroft Library, University  
 of California at Berkeley)

Olivia L. Clemens, 1885.  
 Courtesy *The Mark Twain Papers*,  
 The Bancroft Library, University of  
 California at Berkeley)

1862-64 Worked as reporter and correspondent for Virginia City's  
 Territorial Enterprise.  
 1864-66 Worked as reporter and freelance writer for San Francisco  
 newspapers and magazines.

1865 (November) "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" published in *Saturday  
 Press* (New York).

1866 (March-August) Correspondent in Sandwich Islands for *Sacramento Union*  
 1866-67 Correspondent for San Francisco *Alta California* (New  
 York).

1867 (June-November) Quaker City excursion to Europe and Palestine.



1. In the best tradition of Americans, Mark Twain was many things--a printer, riverboat pilot, journalist, humorist, lecturer, publisher, businessman, soldier, besides being a writer.
2. Mark Twain the pen name adopted by Samuel Langhorne Clemens is a nautical expression used by leadsmen on steamboats for a depth of water. It

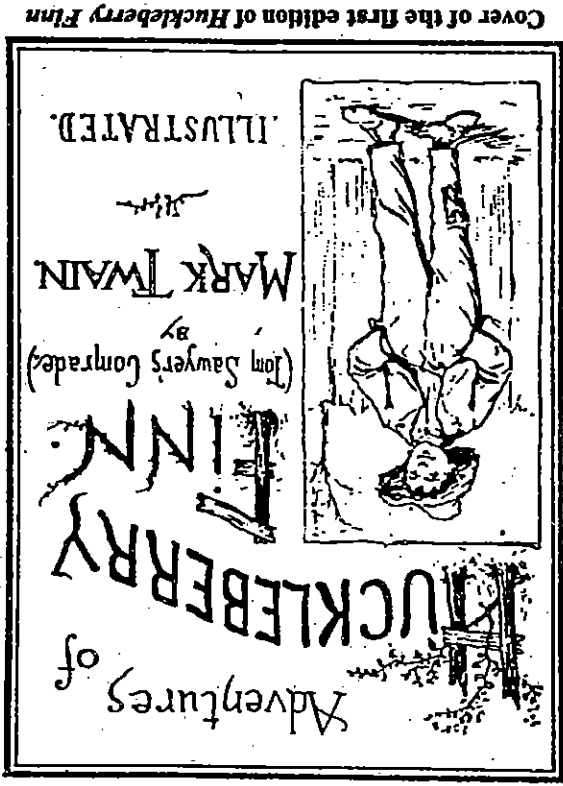
### 11.5.2 Some Highlights of Mark Twain's Career

1867-69	Miscellaneous newspaper correspondence and lecturing.
1869	<i>The Innocents Abroad</i> published, met William Dean Howells.
1870	Married Olivia Langdon of Elmira, New York; settled in Buffalo as editor of <i>Express</i> .
1871	Moved to Hartford, Connecticut; continued lecture tours.
1872	<i>Roughing It</i> published; lecture tour in England.
1873	<i>The Gilded Age</i> a novel in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner; second lecture tour in England.
1875	<i>Sketches, New and Old</i>
1876	<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>
1878-79	Extended visit to Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.
1880	<i>A Tramp Abroad</i>
1881	Began investments in Paige typesetting machine.
1882	<i>The Prince and the Pauper</i>
1883	<i>Life on the Mississippi</i>
1884-85	Toured in a programme of platform readings with George W. Cable; established Charles L. Webster & Co., publishers.
1884 (December)	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> published in England;
1885	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> published in America by his own firm.
1889	<i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i>
1891-95	Residence in Germany, Italy and France, with business trips back to the United States.
1894	Paige typesetter pronounced a failure; Webster company bankrupt.
1894	<i>The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson</i> (novel)
1895-96	Lecture tour through Southern hemisphere.
1896	<i>Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc</i>
1896 (August)	Favourite daughter Susy, dies of meningitis.
1897-1900	Residence in Vienna and London
1897	<i>Following the Equator</i>
1900	<i>The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg and Other Stories</i> ;
	took house in New York; active with Howells in anti-imperialism campaign.
1901	Lit.D. conferred by Yale University.
1902	Lit.D. conferred by University of Missouri.
1903	Moved with family to Italy for his wife's health.
1904	Olivia Langdon Clemens died in Italy.
1906	<i>What is Man?</i>
1907	Lit.D. conferred by Oxford University
1908	Took up residence at Stormfield, near Reading, Connecticut.
1909 (December)	Daughter Jean died.
1910 (April 21)	Died at Stormfield; buried at Elmira.
1916	<i>The Mysterious Stranger</i>

For important landmarks in Mark Twain's life, please refer to the chronology given above. But I should like to highlight some important facets of his career and achievements.

Mark Twain was more than a mere pseudonym; it was a new identity, a new image that Clemens deliberately cultivated with the help of "well placed interviews and lecture tours, magazine articles and books and public gestures and good works. He achieved of fame, wealth, luxury, and friends of the highest circle. He also found fame's shortcomings: endless requests for money and autographs, the absence of privacy, and the loss of self to the public. This last, most subtle demon of fame proved inescapable. When Samuel Langhorne Clemens tired of being Mark Twain, he could not destroy him."

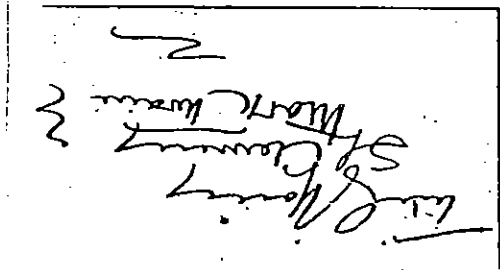
Mark Twain was no less a cultural phenomenon than a writer. He first attracted notice as a humorist and his comic stage performances were an integral part of his persona as much as what he wrote. Then he gradually changed into a distinguished writer and finally became a social philosopher. In other words the Mark Twain persona continued to grow and change.



Cover of the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn*

Sam assumed this public persona from early 1863. Thereafter almost all of his work appeared under the adopted name, though he generally inserted "Samuel L. Clemens" within brackets on the title pages of his books. The cover of the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn* however carries the pen-name Mark Twain only.

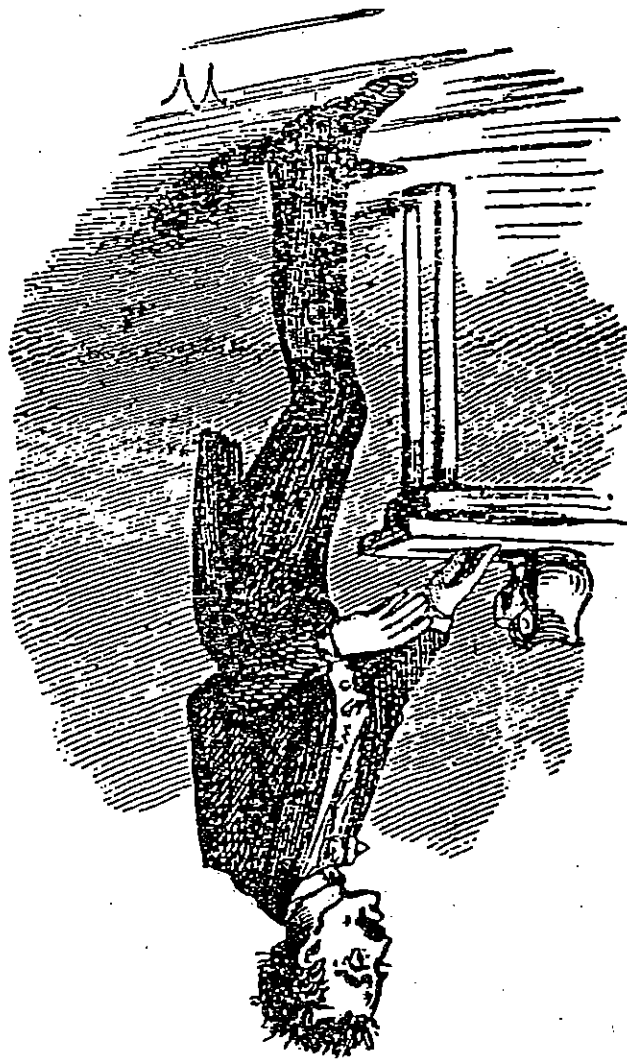
Autograph of "Mark Twain"/Samuel L. Clemens



literally means "two marks," which means two fathoms or 12 feet. The two fathom depth is the dividing line between safe and dangerous shallow water for steamboats.

3. Samuel Clemens wanted to be rich and famous. He wanted to replicate Artemus Ward's success as a humorist on the stage. Eventually he became one of the great speakers of the era and delivered nearly a thousand lectures and speeches in the persona of Mark Twain.

Background



True Williams captured Mark Twain's first-lecture stage fright so well that the publisher used this picture to promote *Roughing It*

During his lecture tours he came to India also in 1896 and spent two months here. During this period he visited Bombay, Allahabad, Varanasi, Calcutta, among other places.

Mark Twain's writing and speaking career were closely intertwined. Just as his success as a writer drove him to the platform, his lecturing helped shape him as a writer and also helped him promote his books. In 1884-85 he gave readings from *Huckleberry Finn* and other books of his. Mark Twain's writings give evidence of his awareness of an audience and the importance of the spoken word. This is particularly true of *Huckleberry Finn*.

### 11.5.3 A Note on Mark Twain's Writings

Mark Twain began his career as a humorist--as a writer of humorous sketches and as a humorous public speaker. (His career as a speaker has already been referred to.)

His retelling of a well-known tall tale *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* first published in 1865 won him immediate recognition. Later he wrote several books of travel and adventure which included *Innocents Abroad* (1869), *Roughing It* (1872), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *Following the Equator* (1897). Here we shall take a close look at four novels of his beginning with *The*

*Guided Age* (1873).



MARK TWAIN (1835-1910) was the first great American to visit India. He came in 1896 at the age of 60, as part of a round-the-world lecture tour. He was fascinated by the sights and sounds of India. In *Following the Equator*, an account of his world tour, Twain recorded his impressions. India, he said, was the "cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition...the one land that all men desire to see, and having once seen, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for all the shows of all the rest of the globe combined."

### *The Guided Age* (1873):

Written in collaboration with C.D. Warner the novel was a satire on the corruption and the obsessive greed of nineteenth century America. The novel began in a dinner conversation in 1872 during which Sam and his friend berated the novels (their) wives read for their entertainment. The book responded by challenging the men to produce a better novel. The book which is a combination of satire, melodrama and sentimentality is now chiefly remembered for its title, which gave its name to the post-Civil War period that it describes.

### *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)

2.

Twain's first solo venture into the territory of fiction, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) is rooted in the memories of his childhood in Hannibal.

Described by Mark Twain as a hymn to boyhood, it presents an idyllic but unsentimental picture of childhood in pre-Civil War rural America. With mischief, boy's pranks, and boy-girl romance, it combines melodramatic events like body snatching, robbery and murder, that match Tom and Huck's boyish imagination. The boy's adventures end on a triumphant note when Tom reveals in the court who the real murderer is, and when Tom and Huck discover the murderer's treasure and become rich. His next book *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) takes off from where he had left off in this book.

3. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), a scientific nineteenth century man finds himself in a primitive world of superstition, faith and ignorance symbolized by Arthurian England. Combining humour, wit, burlesque, literary parody and satire, the novel expresses Mark Twain's dislike of the past and of romance and his respect for American shrewdness and practicality. But though the novel satirizes the stupidity and superstition of Arthurian England, he does not spare his own age either. His attack on slavery is one example.

4. Mark Twain's last novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) resembles *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) in being set in a small Missouri town modelled on Hannibal before the Civil War. It deals with two of his favourite themes, the first of which is the issue of slavery which he explores more honestly and also most directly. The second theme is the effect of environment on the formation of character which he studies by resorting to two completely unrelated lookalikes, slave and free babies, and the familiar plot device of the changling.

Twain's later writing became increasingly dark and bitter. Personal misfortunes came in the form of bankruptcy following the failure of business ventures. Then came a series of bereavements in the family. These misfortunes were responsible, partly at least, for the dark strain of pessimisms and despair in his writings.

Mark Twain is one of those few writers in the world who have been great and popular both. It is an achievement for him to have narrowed down the gap between the two adjectives. He possessed a marvellous ear for the way people talk and this gives his books an unequalled authenticity. His masterpiece *Huckleberry Finn* has been called the "fountainhead of American colloquial prose."

## 11.6 NEGRO SLAVERY IN AMERICA

The following summary is meant to help you to understand the background of slavery in America and the attitudes surrounding the institution, and Mark Twain's interaction with it.

Slavery goes back to prehistoric times. As we have read in Block I in America it started with the need of white settlers for cheap labour to work on plantations. This need was met by the transportation of great numbers of slaves from Africa. These persons of African origin who settled in America are now known as African Americans and the literature produced by them is called African American literature. You will be reading the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, an African American writer.

### 11.6.1 Negro Slavery in the US: A historical View

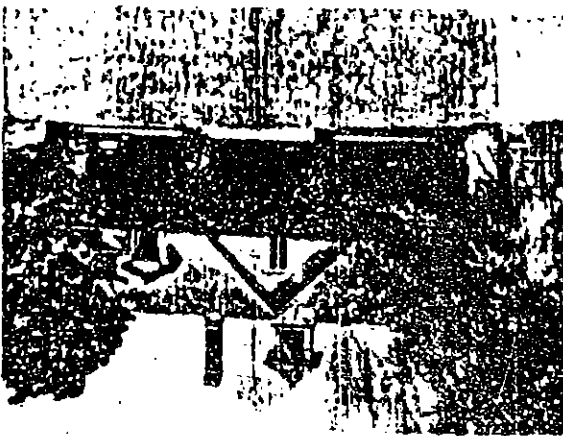
1. Samuel Sewall, a Massachusetts jurist, was among the early humanitarians whose book *The Selling of Joseph* (1700) was an early appeal against slavery.

2. George Washington (1732-99) wished to see the end of slavery by legislative authority and in his will emancipated his own slaves.
3. The most unforgettable condemnation of Negro slavery in early American literature occurs in Crèvecoeur's *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782). He said that whites had crucified the blacks and were devouring them.
4. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the author of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, was among those who saw an inconsistency between American democracy and Negro slavery. He also foresaw the end of slavery. He inherited slaves and although he freed five at his death, he also left many slaves to his descendants.
5. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century an elaborate ideology developed in the South in defense of slavery. Among the defenders was John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) US Vice-President (1825-32) and political philosopher who referred to ancient Athens and asserted that slavery offered the firmest basis for splendid culture. Some other beliefs were: "The Bible nowhere condemns, and throughout recognizes slavery; "Man is born to subjection . . . . The proclivity of the natural man is to dominate or to be subservient."
6. The Constitution of the US effective in 1789 permitted the abolition of foreign slave trade in 1808.
7. Colonization seemed a significant part of the antislavery movement in the 1820's. The Congress gave money for settling free Negroes and freed slaves to Liberia on the West coast of Africa.
8. In 1829 William Lloyd Garrison who was only 24 started publishing *The Genius*. His denunciation of a slave trader earned him a term in prison and he became the first American "immediatist," taking the position that although slavery could not be ended immediately, it was the moral duty of good people to act and talk as though it should and could. He started publishing *The Liberator* in 1831. The journal closed in December 1865.
9. There have been several slave rebellions. A major rebellion composed of from sixty to eighty slaves was led by Nat Turner in Virginia in August 1831 in which fifty-seven whites died. This increased the southern fear of emancipation doctrines. Nat Turner dictated his confessions in prison in 1831.
10. Among the numerous runaways from the slave states into the North the most notable was Frederick Douglass (1817-95), a Maryland-born mulatto who escaped to New York in 1838 and became an abolition activist. His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), became a classic among slave narratives. He was a friend of Mark Twain's father-in-law who was an abolitionist.
11. Under the Missouri Compromise (1850), Missouri was admitted as a slave state but Maine came in as a free state, thus keeping the balance between the North and the South in the Congress.
12. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it a crime not to report anyone suspected of being an escaped slave.

Background

- 13. Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to arouse public sentiments against slavery, particularly in the northeast. The book was an immediate success selling over 300,000 copies in its first year.
  - 14. Negro slavery came to an end in USA on 18 December 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. The freeing of the slaves, however, did not mean the end of racism, thus fulfilling Alex de Tocqueville's prophecy that the abolition of slavery would not mean the end of the negro problem.
  - 15. The Reconstruction of the South following the end of the Civil War (which meant restoring its proper relationship with the Union) aimed, among other things, at assuring the newly emancipated Negro not only his freedom but his political and civil rights. The Reconstruction collapsed in 1877 with the recalling of Federal troops from the South. With this came to an end any serious effort to protect the Negro in his constitutional rights. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois - "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again towards slavery."
  - 16. Jim Crow is the name of the policy of segregating and discriminating against Blacks especially by laws passed in the South in the late 19th century. This policy was not seriously challenged until after World War II.
  - 17. It was on 19 May 1954 that the US Supreme Court held that it was unconstitutional for the public schools to segregate the races.
- 11.6.2 Mark Twain and Slavery**
- Mark Twain grew up in a white slave-holding society in which he probably heard the word 'nigger' more often than any other term for African Americans.
- Born into a slave culture Sam assimilated the belief that difference in skin colour meant a difference not only in caste but in fundamental rights. In his Autobiography Mark Twain says: "In my schooldays I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local paper said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it."
- But Sam had a special affection for Uncle Dan'l, a slave at his Uncle's farm at Florida, Missouri. Uncle Dan'l was wise and tender and it was there that "I got my strong liking for his race and my appreciation of his fine qualities."
- His father John Marshall Clemens owned a slave. In 1841 he sat on a circuit court jury that sent three abolitionists who had ushered some slaves north to freedom to the penitentiary. He had received his greatest accolade for his unyielding attitude to slavery.
- Sam's father-in-law Jervis Langdon on the other hand was a noted abolitionist and a friend of Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave and a journalist and a leading abolitionist. The father-in-law played an important part in shaping up Sam's anti-slavery attitude later.
- Mark Twain spent every summer for nineteen years from 1871 to 1889 at Elmira, New York. It was here in 1874 that he heard from the cook Mary Ann Cord, an ex-slave the story of her separation from her husband and children at the auction block and her eventual reunion with her younger child. Mark Twain found it "a shameful taste of wrong and hardship" and published it in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The story

obviously left a lasting impression on Mark Twain's mind for it demonstrated to him that blacks cared for their children as whites did.



Quarry Farm, Elmira, New York, (Courtesy The Mark Twain Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley)

The story was to find an echo in *A Connecticut Yankee* and also in *Huckleberry Finn* (Chapter 23) where Huck reports Jim mourning his separation from his children. Curiously the entry under Negroes in the American Cyclopedias stated: "Negroes are comparatively insensible to pain." According to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, the most important thing Mary Ann Cord taught Twain was that the vernacular--in her case, the ungrammatical dialect of a woman with no formal education--could move a narrative forward dramatically and effectively" (p.88).

Shelley Fisher Fishkin draws attention to a letter written by Mark Twain on 24 December 1885 (the year of *Huckleberry Finn's* publication in the US) to Dean Francis Wayland of the Yale Law School agreeing to finance the education of a promising black student Warner T. McGuinn. The letter throws light on Mark Twain's views on racism: "We have ground the marhood out of them [the blacks], and shame is ours, not theirs, and we should pay for it" (p.101).

Mark Twain wrote an anti-lynching editorial entitled "Only a Nigger" in the *Buffalo Express* in 1869 in which he explored the subject of racism satirically using the rhetoric of the bigot ironically. Here is a sample: "Only a 'nigger' killed by mistake--that is all... But mistakes will happen, even in the conduct of the best regulated and most high-toned mobs, and surely there is no good reason why Southern gentlemen should worry themselves with useless regrets, so long as only an innocent 'nigger' is hanged, or roasted or knotted to death, now and then... what are the lives of a few 'niggers' in comparison with the impetuous instincts of a proud and fiery race? (Shelley Fisher Fishkin, p. 82).

But the charge that *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book remains. During the 1950s the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) called for *Huckleberry Finn's* banning from schools and libraries.

### 11.6.3 Writing about and by African Americans before *Huckleberry Finn*

Novelist David Bradley, author of *The Chaneyville Incident* refers to *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) as "the First Nigger Novel" and holds that it is a work that prefigured the fiction of African American writers in the twentieth century including his own (See Shelley Fishkin, p.110). But Harriet Beecher Stowe's immensely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) came first. With docile Uncle Tom as the central figure, it



preached the evils of slavery to a nation that needed to learn Christian humility. Recent African American scholars have however questioned the image of the submissive Tom as a role model for African Americans.

African American literature appeared in many forms in the early 1800's. White abolitionists encouraged the writing and publication of slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs. Nat Turner who led a slave rebellion in 1831 told his life story in prison called *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831). Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) was an autobiography.

William Wells Brown's *The Escape or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) was the first African American play. And Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) was the first African American novel in America.

I would like you to dip into *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and also sample some of the others. Anthologies which could be consulted are mentioned in the Section on Further Reading.

#### 11.6.4 American Fiction: The Rise of Realism

The two terms that are used to describe American prose fiction of the nineteenth century are the romance and the novel. Both are large hold-all terms, difficult to define precisely.

Writers like Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville who wrote before the great divide of the Civil War of 1861-65 have been loosely grouped under the rubric of romance writers. The romance writers were mainly preoccupied with man alone or with man and nature rather than with man in relation to society. Their concerns were spiritual rather than social, personal rather than political. The result was a preference for lonely, grand, unsociable heroes and characters. In terms of form this led to recourse to myth and symbolism and allegory.

On the other hand Mark Twain, W.D. Howells and Henry James who came after produced novels that stood in a direct relation to the society in which they lived. The realistic novel of which Mark Twain was the great exemplar deals with life as it is lived. The urge to portray things as they are and as they happen is really paramount in the post-Civil War period and this accounts for important developments in American fictional structure and prose style towards realism.

However, these two categories are not exclusive. Henry James in fact called the disjunction between the two as a 'clumsy separation'. It is with this commingling of romance and realism in mind that Richard Chase has used the term romance novel to describe the American fiction of the 19th century. Professor A.N. Kaul's term for it is Critical Romance. And he has demonstrated that despite Hawthorne's repeated claims to be a writer of romances, three volumes of his fiction namely, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance* examine some of the issues of the modern world like "democracy, individual freedom, the status of women, the problems and possibilities of liberal democracy as well as socialism." On the other hand, *Huckleberry Finn* has, according to him, a strong element of romance in it, symbolized by the raft which becomes a "home" and where "you feel free and easy and comfortable."

Of the three writers of novels, though Twain was the most popular, Howells was the most influential. Howells was a prolific writer and his novels of the 1880's and 1890's were particularly realistic. As a critic he called for a literary realism that would treat ordinary Americans truthfully. He held that with this truth "the book

<b>Abolitionist</b>	one who favours abolishing the practice of Negro slavery.
<b>huckleberry</b>	nineteenth century slang for an inconsequential person. Originally it is the name of a variety of deep-blue edible berry native to North America.
<b>lynching</b>	Putting a person to death for an alleged offense without a legal trial. The practice particularly prevalent in 19th century America is probably named after Col. Charles Lynch (1736-96), American justice for Peace and farmer, who presided over illegal self-constituted courts that held summary trials and awarded punishments to offenders without the due process of law. Lynching was given to both whites and blacks. For an attempted lynching in <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> see chapters 21 and 22.
<b>nigger</b>	a pejorative slang term for a non-white person; derived from the Spanish word negro.

## 11.8 GLOSSARY

Any literary work must be seen both in relation to the life experience and values of its author and to the sociocultural content of the times in which it remains firmly rooted. This is crucially important in the case of *Huckleberry Finn* which deals with the sensitive issue of slavery.

By the time he had come to write this novel, Mark Twain had left Hannibal and had settled at Elmira, New York and had outgrown his slave-holding heritage. His friend William Dean Howells said that he had become "the most desouthernized southerner" that he had known. However, Twain's presentation of slavery and the language used for it have been faulted and the book has been objected to as being racist. The 'adventures' of Huck and Tom in the book may have come to an end but not the adventures of the book.

The background information about the author and the age provided here should help you to probe the issues raised in this Unit, particularly the writer's treatment of slavery, further.

Another remarkable thing about *Huckleberry Finn* is its innovative use of dialect by the semi-literate 14 year old boy Huck as the central consciousness in the novel.

## 11.7 LET US SUM UP

Together these three novelists brought realism to maturity, perfected vernacular style and explored the literary possibilities of presenting inner life, leaving the novel open for further experimentation in regard to themes and techniques.

The third novelist, Henry James, was a realist of the inner life and believed that the literary artist should not merely hold a mirror to the surface of social life but probe the psychological and moral nature of human beings deeply.

cannot be wicked and cannot be weak; and without it all graces of style and feats of invention and cunning of construction are so many superfluities of nature."

tar and feathers smear with tar and then cover with feathers as a punishment. This punishment is given to the king and the duke in chapter 33 of the novel.

territory here, the still uncivilized frontier.

**American Civil War (1861-65)** The war between the northern US State (usually known as the Union) and the Confederate States of the South was fought between April 1861 and April 1865. The Southern States had seceded from the Federal Union over the issue of slavery and States rights. In the war they offered military resistance to the superior industrial strength of the north for four years but the main Confederate Army surrendered in April 1865.

The war was a kind of watershed in American history as it was in Mark Twain's life. It formally ended slavery and accelerated western expansion. It temporarily destroyed the South's economy and estranged the South from the rest of the Union. Besides, it increased the interest of the rest of the country in the South. This helped to increase the popularity of Mark Twain's books set in the South.

### 11.9 QUESTIONS

1. How many times does the writer use the offensive word *nigger* in the novel?
2. What is your own response to the novel? Do you like it? Why?

### 11.10 FURTHER READING

#### Text

Clemens, Samuel Langhorne. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and Thomas Cooley. Second Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977.

Besides the text, the book contains background sources and criticism.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Jane Ogborn. Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1995.

#### Other Books

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*. New York, 1997.

Inge, M. Thomas. *Huck Finn among the critics: A Centennial Selection 1884-1984*. Washington: US Information Agency, 1984.

Contains Background, Early Responses, Modern criticism and information on the novel in pictures and in film and an annotated checklist of criticism.

Sattelmeyer, Robert and J. Donald Crowley, eds. *One Hundred Years of "Huckleberry Finn": Centennial Essays*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.

Contains a 14-page long useful introductory essay entitled "The Continuing Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Other Critical Essays."

The study of narrative has assumed a new importance in recent times. Human beings have always liked to hear or tell stories. But narratives are no longer restricted to prose fiction. The word narrative has emerged as a large hold-all term that includes T.V. newscasters' reports, let us say, Kashmir, comics, ad films, inscriptions on tombstones even mime. As Roland Barthes says, "narratives may be represented in the medium of language, spoken or written, in images fixed or moving, in gestures or a combination of these." Further, "narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation." In other words narratives are ubiquitous, surrounding us on all sides. To use Barthes' words again, "narrative is

**12.1 INTRODUCTION**

- This Unit has a two-fold objective:
- i) to give you some preliminary information about the novel i.e. its sources, composition, time and setting; and
  - ii) by focussing on the narrative examine how the narrative technique adopted in the novel contributes to the total meaning of it.

**12.0 OBJECTIVES**

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Some Key Questions
- 12.3 Preliminary Information about *Huckleberry Finn*
  - 12.3.1 Sources
  - 12.3.2 Composition
  - 12.3.3 Time and Setting
  - 12.3.4 Mississippi
  - 12.3.5 St. Petersburg
  - 12.3.6 Jackson's Island
- 12.4 Narrative Structure of American *Huckleberry Finn*
  - 12.5 Distinctive Features of the Narrative
    - 12.5.1 Picaresque form
    - 12.5.2 First Person Eye Witness Boy Narrator
    - 12.5.2.1 The Spoken Idiom of the Narrative
    - 12.5.2.2 Density of narration
    - 12.5.3 Modes of Presentation
    - 12.5.4 Narrative Irony
    - 12.5.5 Popular Element in the Narrative
  - 12.6 Let Us Sum Up
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  - 12.8 Questions
  - 12.9 Further Readings

Structure

**UNIT 12 HUCKLEBERRY FINN AND ITS NARRATIVE**

international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself". No wonder narratives are now considered central to human culture.

Explaining the primacy of narrative, Jonathan Culler says that stories are "the main way we make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world." It is in recognition of the important part that narrative plays in human life that a whole new branch of knowledge has grown round narrative and narration, called narratology. Apart from Jonathan Culler and Roland Barthes, some of the names connected with theories on the subject are Bakhtin, Northrop Frye, A.J. Greimas, Robert Kellogg, and Robert Scholes. In case you feel interested, you could as a first step dip into *Recent Theories of Narrative* by Wallace Martin (Cornell University Press, 1986) and some other books suggested in the Section in *Further Readings*.

It is important for you to realize that our study of narrative in *Huckleberry Finn* will need to take into account all the factors that influenced the telling of the tale.

## 12.2 SOME KEY QUESTIONS

While approaching the issue of narrative, I would like you to recall the novels you have read as part of your course or otherwise and ask the following questions:

i) Who is the narrator in each one of them? Is the author and the narrator the same person? Or are they different? Is the story told in the first person/third person?

ii) What advantages do you see in the writer's choice of the narrator? Ask these questions regarding *Huckleberry Finn* also as you read the novel.

## 12.3 PRELIMINARY INFORMATION ABOUT HUCKLEBERRY FINN

### 12.3.1 Sources

Some characters and episodes in *Huckleberry Finn* have been traced to their sources in books that Mark Twain had apparently read and in his childhood experiences. For instance, Jim's original was a middle-aged slave, Uncle Dan'l by name, who lived in Sam's Uncle's farm in Florida, Missouri where Sam spent a great deal of his time. ". . . the most memorable servant of the Quarleses [Sam's Uncle's family] was middle-aged Uncle Dan'l, sensible, honest, patient, the children's comrade in adventure, their adviser and ally in time of trouble." It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race," wrote Mark, "and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities" (Dixon Vector, 271). Huck himself was drawn from a childhood friend of his, Tom Blankenship. Like Huck Finn, Tom was ill-fed, an outrageous wreck of rags, dirty, ignorant, cheerful, carefree, and altogether enviable, being the only really independent person--boy or man--in the community. . . . The woods and the waters around Hannibal were his education. Living by his wits, suspicious of every attempt to civilize him, . . . he had none of the unimportant virtues and all the essential ones. The school of hard knocks had given him a tenacious grasp on reality, despite his faith in dreams, omens and superstitions. But it had not toughened him into cynicism or crime, and he had as good a heart as ever any boy had" (Dixon Vector, 276).

Huck's attempt to delude Jim into believing he has been dreaming during the fog is modelled on the story of Pike told by William Wright who was a friend of Twain's. The feud between Shepherds and Grangerfords and the shooting of Bags by Col Sherburn were similarly modelled on real life incidents.

### 12.3.2 Composition

*Huckleberry Finn* took eight years to write. Mark Twain began writing on what he called "Huckleberry Finn's Autobiography" in the summer of 1876 and after 400 pages he liked it "only tolerably well." He laid it aside for about 3 years, restarted writing it (Chapter 17-21) in the winter of 1879-80 and the following summer and then came back to it in the summer of 1883.

Mark Twain wanted to write a boy's book, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. The title of Huck's book reminds us that he is Tom's comrade but he also wanted it to be unlike *Tom Sawyer* by using a first-person narrator: "I shall take a boy of twelve and run him on through life (in the first person) but not Tom Sawyer—he would not be a good character for it." Clearly he was planning a book that was generically different from its predecessor. And generically different *Huckleberry Finn* is from *Tom Sawyer*.

*Huckleberry Finn* begins in the vein of *Tom Sawyer* but the adventures of Tom and Huck continue only for a short while—till the third chapter at the end of which Tom drops off. With the entry of Pap Finn the narrative takes a sharp turn. Soon Huck and Jim begin their journey to freedom on a raft down the Mississippi.



Pap Finn wads in Huck's room to surprise him in chapter 5 of *Huckleberry Finn*

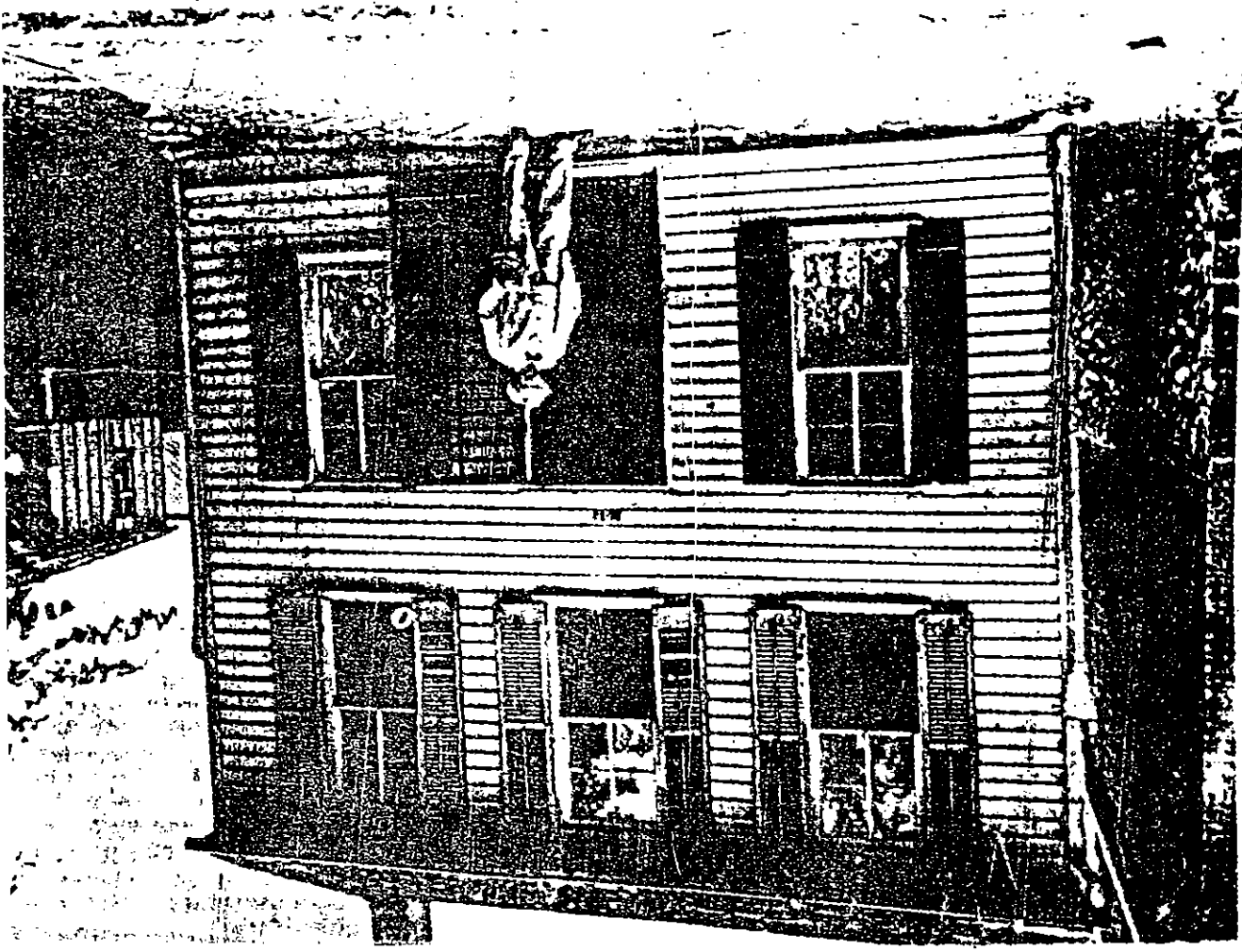
Tom reappears in the last section of the book but as I shall try to argue later Tom's reinroduction is meant to be a satiric comment on those who like Tom delay Jim's achievement of freedom for whimsical reasons of their own. Unlike *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* is more than a children's book, it is a comic masterpiece for adults.

and a profound novel that explores such universal themes as freedom and bondage, race relations, conscience, greed and human cruelty.

### 12.3.3 Time and Setting

The novel is set in anti-bellum America, which means America of the pre-Civil War period, more precisely forty or fifty years before it was published in 1884.

The settings are the riverside town which was Samuel Clemens' boyhood home, Hannibal, represented in the novel as St. Petersburg, his Uncle Quates' farm he visited during his holidays which reappears as Silas Phelps' plantation near Pikeville, and the Mississippi river on which he was a steamboat pilot as a young man. The book is thus firmly rooted in Sam's early experiences. As he once wrote: "I confine myself to the boy life out on the Mississippi, because that had a peculiar charm for me and not because I was not familiar with other aspects of life."



Mark Twain's last visit to his boyhood home in 1902. (Courtesy, Library of Congress, Pictures & Prints Division)

Does the book then merely look back at an idyllic period of childhood and young manhood? It doesn't because during the 1840's the question of slavery was a most important issue in the United States particularly in the Middle West--his own state Missouri was a slave owning State and figures as such in the novel. And the problem has not been entirely resolved yet. So the novel is not merely nostalgic--it is Janus-faced looking back and looking towards the future.

Since the Mississippi river figures centrally in *Huckleberry Finn*, a short note on a few physical details about it and Mark Twain's relationship with it would be in order.



Map of the area covered in the novel, drawn by Charles Dibner, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, 1943. "Everyman's Library." Courtesy Elsevier-Dutton Publishing Co., Inc.



"The river flows through over 1,250,000 square miles and 31 States. It rises in northern Minnesota's Lake Itasca, flows due south about 2,350 miles and empties into the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans, Louisiana. Virtually the entire river is navigable."

Hannibal where Sam grew up is situated on the banks of the Mississippi. He lived there from 1839 to 1853. Except for two short spells, Twain lived on or within sight of the river from the time he was four until he was 25. Later he worked in river towns. In 1875 he became an apprentice steamboat pilot and spent four years on the Mississippi itself. In 1861 he revisited the river at least 8 times though he was never to live on it again. In June 1902 he and a childhood friend John Briggs climbed Hannibal's Cardiff Hill and saw the river for the last time. Later, recalling this moment he said that he "was seeing now the most enchanting river-view the planet could furnish. I never knew it when I was a boy; it took an educated eye that had travelled on the globe to know and appreciate it."

Naturally, the river figures prominently in some of his writing. He wrote a memoir of his apprentice pilot days serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* which later reappeared in an expanded form as *Life on the Mississippi*. The river's presence is felt throughout in *Tom Sawyer* and is even more central to *Huckleberry Finn*. Though Huck and Jim are on the river aboard their raft in only about a fifth of its 43 chapters, the river is either mentioned or referred to in almost every chapter.

A question to ask while you are reading the novel is "How would you characterize the experiences that Huck and Jim undergo while on the river? Bountiful? Terrible? Or both? Does it fulfil Jim's quest for freedom? Or does it hinder it?"

### 12.3.5 St. Petersburg

The fictional town in this novel as also in *Tom Sawyer* was clearly modelled on Mark Twain's hometown of Hannibal in northeastern Missouri.

Find out how many chapters are set in the town.

### 12.3.6 Jackson's Island

Fictional uninhabited island on the Mississippi! towards the Illinois shore, about three miles down St. Petersburg. Huck flees to the island to escape his brutal drunken father and Jim has run away to this place for fear of being sold by his owner Miss Watson. Inevitably Huck runs into Jim and they both join forces to begin their journey on a raft down the river. Read Chapter 9 for a description of the island.

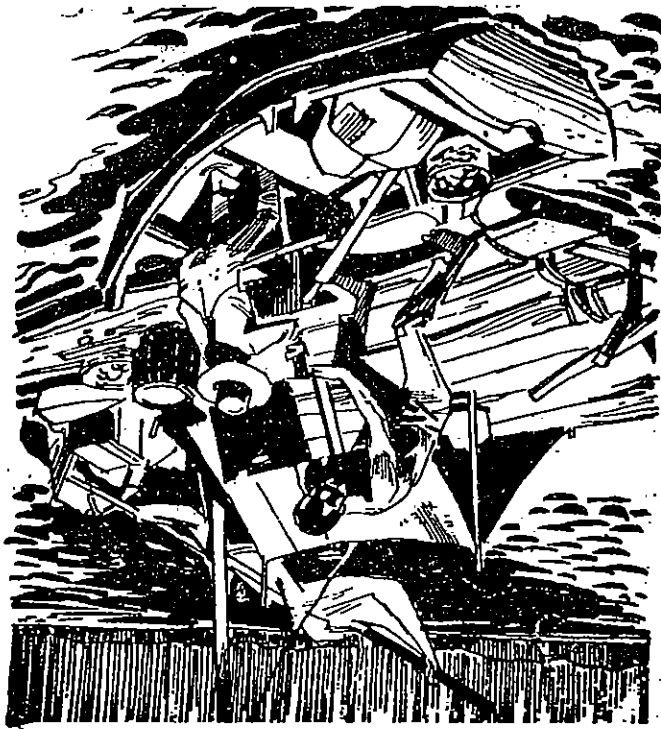
## 12.4 THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

I hope you have been able to read the novel by now. I should like to introduce this section by recalling two lines from Sygne's *Playboy of the Western World*. Referring to the story of the 'murder' of his father, by the runaway Christy, the girls say:

Susan: That's a grand story  
Honor: He tells it lovely.

Do you see which factors are important in a narration or storytelling? Clearly three factors are important in the process of narration: the teller of the tale, events of the tale, and how the teller presents these events. A fourth element is the audience. The choice of the events that compose a tale and how they are presented are influenced by

Loading the Loot onto the Raft



### Part II: Journey on a Raft

The novel begins in the vein of *Tom Sawyer* with Huckleberry Finn introducing himself as the narrator and recounting the events of the earlier book. But Tom is dropped off in chapter 3 and along with him is dropped the romantic element in the form of his attempt to form a gang of robbers. There is a sharp change in the narrative in chapter 4 when Pap Finn, Huck's drunken father, is introduced. Huck 'civilize' him cannot stand the disturbing presence of his father even more. He takes his own death in the cabin where his father has confined him and escapes to Jackson's Island. Separately Miss Watson's slave Jim too escapes to the Island on learning of her plan to sell him down the river for 800 dollars. Both the fugitives meet on the Island and Huck promises to Jim never to give him away.

On hearing that people are after Jim, both decide to escape on a raft down the Mississippi in quest of freedom. These eleven chapters help prepare the groundwork for the story of the great escape by Huck and Jim.

It is not often that a character in a literary text takes over as a narrator in another text. This is what happens in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The first eleven chapters could be grouped together as they are all set in or near St. Petersburg.

### Part I: Prelude to the Journey of Escape

But before we analyse the narrative we shall do well to consider the narrative structure of the novel. The novel is episodic in structure. It could be divided into three parts.

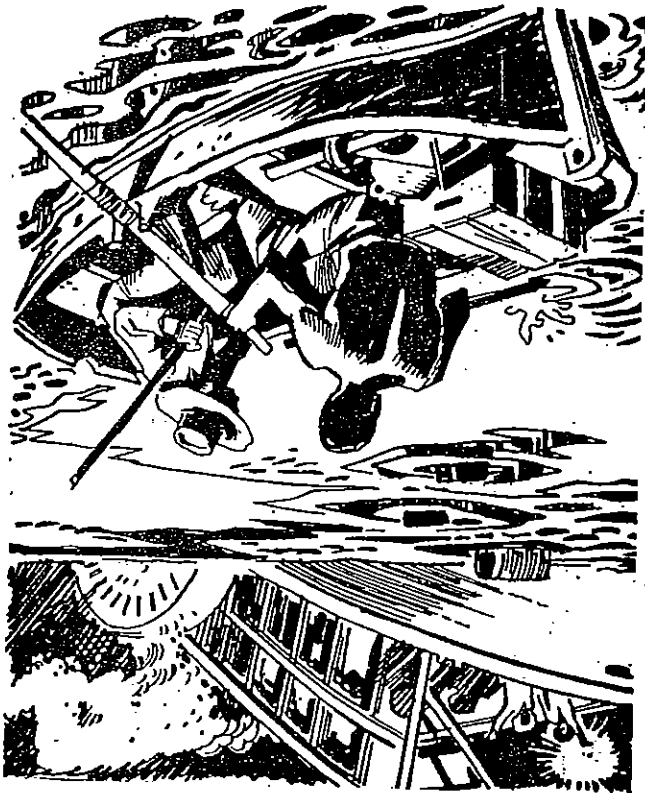
a number of considerations including the age, sex, race, social status of both the teller and the audience. The conventions governing the narration and the language used in the narration are also important.

The next twenty chapters (Ch. 12-31) are the central part concerned with the journey of Huck and Jim down the Mississippi first by themselves and later in the unwelcome company of two frauds, the king and the duke.

The journey is interrupted several times with episodes on the shore in many of which the two frauds take a part.

A most important focus in this part is Huck's relationship with Jim which involves his wrestling with his conscience.

First Huck and Jim run into a wrecked steamboat called *Walter Scott*. Huck tries to help its trapped inmates but without success. Later both agree not to get mixed up with such adventures.



Leaving the Wreck

Huck discovers that Jim does not have a good opinion of royalty. After a storm he plays a prank on Jim but apologises to him later. Because of the fog Jim's plan to escape to freedom via Cairo and Ohio river go awry. As Huck listens to Jim's joy on his approaching freedom there is a conflict in his mind but ultimately he throws in his lot with Jim. Immediately afterwards he saves Jim from slave hunters by putting them on a false scent. Later they escape being mown by a steamboat.

The adventures on the shore begin with Huck's encounter with the Grangerfords who have a long-standing but pointless feud with the Shepherds in which many of them get killed.

From chapter 19 onwards the two frauds take control of the raft. Their adventures include posing as a reformed pirate and printer, doing Shakespeare's plays and most of all impersonating the English brothers of a local man Peter Wilks who has recently died. In this last trick they almost manage to fool a whole town.

Huck discovers that the king has sold Jim for 40 dollars to Silas Phelps. His guilt over helping the runaway slave Jim resurfaces and he writes a letter to Miss Watson

"I Am a King!"



"I Am the Rightful Duke of Bridgewater."



confessing everything. But he finally tears off the letter and is now determined to help win back Jim's freedom. Three points of focus in this part are:

- (1) Jim's plans to escape to freedom go awry because of the fog and they move deeper into slave territory.
- (ii) Huck successfully wrestles with his conscience over being a party to Jim's escape.
- (iii) Huck is an unwilling witness to the spectacle of cruelty, selfishness and greed during the adventures on shore.

Part III: Freeing of Jim

The last part consisting of 12 chapters (Ch.32 to Ch.43) is mainly concerned with Tom's over-elaborate plan to free Jim or what he calls 'evasion'. All action takes place in and around Pikesville.

Huck goes to the Phelps farm in search of Jim but is mistaken by Sally Phelps, Tom Sawyer's aunt, for Tom. Guessing that Tom is expected at the farm, Huck makes for the town on the pretext of fetching his luggage and meets Tom on the way. Huck explains the situation to Tom and goes back to the farm along with his [Tom's] luggage.

When Tom comes he is received as his brother Sid. Huck tells him of his plan to free Jim but is both shocked and surprised when the respectable Tom agrees to be a 'nigger stealer'.

Huck is unhappy to see the ignominious exit that the two frauds make covered with tar and feathers. Tom correctly guesses that Jim is held prisoner in a cabin. From this point on Tom takes over in planning and directing an elaborate operation of escape for Jim.

In the escape Tom is injured by a shot in the calf. Leaving Tom in the raft, Huck fetches a kindly old doctor to treat his injury.

Tom's disappearance causes considerable worry to Uncle Silas. Soon Tom is brought home by the old doctor and Jim is taken prisoner. The doctor reveals that Jim instead of running away nursed Tom back to health. Tom now discloses that Miss Watson had released Jim two months back in her will. Knowing that Aunt Sally plans to civilize him Huck decides to light out for the territory and remain a free person.

Does *Huckleberry Finn* have a unified structure? In what way?

I have used the question form in the sub-title for two reasons--because in one of the two epigraphs to the book Mark Twain warns the readers not to look for a plot in the novel or else they will be lost; and secondly because there is a continuing debate about the issue of unity and coherence in the book.

Mark Twain has been described as being temperamentally incapable of sustained concentration required for tight and well-developed plots. According to Bernard DeVoto, he "was not a systematic thinker." And he did not work on the novel systematically. It has also been suggested that the freedom of the picaresque form suited his talent ideally. But the episodic structure implicit in the picaresque form notwithstanding, the novel has been credited with possessing internal unity and coherence. In fact as has been suggested earlier Mark Twain's use of the modified form of picaresque narrative serves his purpose best--for it allows him to make social criticism through the eye witness first person boy narrator and at the same time focus

The narrative in *Huckleberry Finn* is based on realism and truth. Mark Twain achieves this effect principally by using a first person eye-witness boy narrator. This

### 12.5.2 The first person eye witness boy narrator

Scholes and Kellogg suggest that the picaresque narrative could be turned outward to expose the weaknesses of the society or it could be turned inward in which case it became a confession and recorded the moral regeneration of the narrator. *Huckleberry Finn* is remarkable because it blends both: it is a severe indictment of the corruption, moral decay and intellectual impoverishment of the society to which Huck is a witness but it is also an unpretentious account of his moral growth vis-a-vis his relations with Jim.

His central character-narrator is of course not a rogue and his is not a road journey but a journey down the Mississippi. On the contrary he is a poor white boy who living on the fringe of respectable society serves as a moral touchstone in the course of his journey and whose lengthiest encounter in the novel is with a pair of rogues, among others.

The structure of *Huckleberry Finn* is firmly rooted in the tradition of the simple linear form of the picaresque narrative which goes back to Petronius's *Satiricon*. In *Nature of Narrative*, Scholes and Kellogg say: "In picaresque narrative a rogue tells the story of his own experiences in the contemporary world, usually involving his travels from place to place and through a wide spectrum of society. The main interests of picaresque fiction are social and satirical" (p. 73-74). This pattern Mark Twain has modified to suit his artistic purpose.

### 12.5.1 Picaresque form

## 12.5 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE NARRATIVE

### 1. Does the ending represent a falling off? If so, in what way?

The ending of the novel has been a subject of debate among critics. But since it involves the thematic concerns of the novel also it would be better to discuss the question later in this study material. But I would like you to re-read the ending and form your own response to it. Keep the following question in mind as you do so.

The episodes themselves are stitched together by the recurrent pattern of symbolic death and rebirth. The pattern begins when Huck fakes his own death in order to escape his drunken father's control and continues till the end when he has to find his own identity--Who am I? at the Phelps' place. The disclosure that Tom's Aunt Sally has mistaken him for Tom, makes Huck feel relieved: "it was like being born again, I was so glad to find who I was" (p. 252). This pattern of symbolic death and rebirth and the endless yarnspinning that it involves are essential to Huck's survival and freedom and moral growth.

The structure though episodic is not without a sense of design. The journey on the river which constitutes the core of the novel is both preceded and succeeded by events on shore in St. Petersburg and Pikesville respectively. The river or the road that moves itself also lends a kind of unity to the structure by controlling the journey and taking Huck and Jim in a particular direction. As T.S. Eliot says, the river will not let them land at Cairo, where Jim could have reached freedom; it is the River that separates them . . . and the River that reunites them. Moreover, as Lionel Trilling suggests in his essay "The Greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*," "the hero's departure from the river and his return to it compose a subtle and significant pattern."

on Huck's moral growth. Apart from thematic unity, the various episodes are held together by the unifying voice of the narrator and his point of view.

device ensures greater realism. The fact that the boy narrator is a character living on the periphery of society without any 'respectable' ambitions of his own, together with his moral sensitivity makes his narrative more objective and more truthful.

In the first paragraph of the novel itself Huck the narrator separates himself from the author of *Tom Sawyer* who at times tampered with truth.

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There were things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.

By distancing himself for Mark Twain, Huck is making space for himself as a truthful teller of his story.

### 12.5.2.1 The Spoken Idiom of the Narrative

The opening paragraph also identifies a key feature of the narrative, namely, the spoken idiom used in it.

"The oral quality of Huck's written narrative sets it apart from some other first person narratives. Though Huck is composing a book--and he is aware of it (. . . if I'd known what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't tackled it and ain't a-going to no more.) he adopts the style of a person speaking to other persons. (The use of the vernacular idiom which has won extravagant praise from Hemingway and others will be discussed in a later Unit.) But it is important to note that Huck as narrator shows an awareness of the presence of an audience/reader. Evidence of this which is widespread in the narrative includes the use of the pronoun 'you'.

Moreover Huck's language has a recognizable oral quality marked by the frequent use of run-on sentences with the help of "and", "and then" and so on, by what Walter Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy* (1982) calls the additive oral style.

The widow she cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it. She put me in them new clothes again, and I couldn't do nothing but sweat and sweat, and feel all cramped up. Well, then, the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time (p. 11).

The conversational idiom used here helps in producing the intended effect of simplicity and innocence and naive which is in sharp contrast to the inflated language of the tricksters in the novel. The spoken idiom used by Huck to narrate also makes the transition to dramatic presentation easier. Mark Twain sustains the tone of the spoken idiom almost throughout the novel which closes with Huck Finn signing off as yours truly in the manner of a letter to the reader.

Apart from signifying the narrator's awareness of the audience/readers' presence this direct address and more especially the spoken idiom help to make the discourse more intimate and more credible. A similar use of the pronoun 'you' can be found in chapter 18 where Huck is describing Col. Grangerford.

His hands was long and thin, and every day of his life he put on a clean shirt and full suit for head to foot made out of linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it; . . . He was as kind as he could be - You could feel that, you know, and so you had confidence.

He sustains the tone of the spoken word throughout the novel which closes with Huck Finn signing off as yours truly in the manner of a letter to the reader.

A careful study of the narrative reveals that Huck the narrator is telling his story some time after the events have happened, though how much time has elapsed it is difficult to say. Since Huck is the original experimenter of those events it is possible to distinguish between Huck the protagonist and Huck the narrator. Much of the narrative strategy depends on how the author handles the chronological gap. At times the narrator self-consciously refers to his narration. In chapter 7 for instance, he talks to the readers about the inadequacy of his language to describe a scene ("you know what I mean - I don't know the words to put it in" p. 48). In chapter 18 he refers to the need to trim his narrative ("I don't want to talk much about the next day. I reckon I'll cut it pretty short", p. 134). Such occasions are however few and far between.

### 12.5.3 Modes of Presentation

The circumstantiality of the narrator including details of different kinds attests to the power of observation of the eye-witness and inspires the readers' confidence. Huck puts this skill to good use, while faking stories to lull suspicion and put people on the wrong scent. When the king and the duke ask Huck about Jim, he tells them a sob story about the death of everyone in the family except "pa and my brother, Ike, and how pa went to live with Uncle Ben who got a little one-horse place forty four mile below Orleans (20:148)." But while narrative density is used by Huck to survive in a world full of violence and fraud, the duke and the king have the same skill to deceive and cheat others.

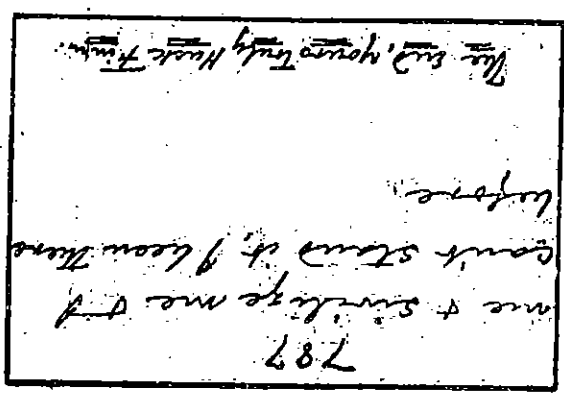
Now I thought of something else. So I went and got the bag of meal and my old saw out of the canoe and fetched them to the house. I took the bag to where it used to stand, and ripped a hole in the bottom of it with the saw, for there weren't no knives and forks on the place--pap done everything with his clasp-knife about the cooking. Then I carried the sack about a hundred yards across the grass and through the willows east of the house, to shallow lake that was five mile wide and full of rushes - and ducks, too, you might say, in the season... (7:47, italics added).

Huck's narration is circumstantial, dense with details. Here is a sample from Huck's description of how he faked his own death:

### 12.5.2.2 Density of Narration

I want you to keep track of any other evidence of the narrator's awareness of the readers.

The final page of the manuscript of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (Courtesy the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, New York.)





Principally the narrator either proceeds with the narrative of the past but bobbing up at regular intervals with reflections/comments in the present; or reports the events in verbatim withholding his identity completely. A combination of both these modes helps Mark Twain to break monotony and sustain interest at the same time ensuring greater realism and credibility.

The first mode could be illustrated by the following excerpt:

Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try to not do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it. Here she was a bothering about Moses, which was no kin to her, and no use to anybody . . . (1:12).

The unselfconscious care with which the narrative moves between past and present and back into the past helps keep it flowing. Notice also that the narrator's reflections or comments are brief, which also contributes to keeping the narrative uncluttered. Here is a slightly longer piece of reflection when Huck gets separated from Jim in the fog.

I kept quiet, with my ears cocked, about fifteen minutes, I reckon. I was floating along, of course, four or five mile an hour; but you don't ever think of that. No, you feel like you are laying dead still on the water and if a little glimpse of a snag slips by, you don't think to yourself how fast you're going, but you catch your breath and think, my! how that snag's tearing along. If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in a fog that way, by yourself, in the night, you try to find it once--you'll see (15:100-01).

Huck uses the present tense as narrator not only to reflect or remark or comment but also to indicate his intense involvement while describing past events. This is clear from the two sentences immediately following the excerpt quoted above:

Next, for about a half an hour, I whoops now and then; at last I hear the answer a long ways off, and tries to follow it, but I couldn't do it, and directly I judged . . . (p. 101).

Huck's use of the historical present is in fact habitual and helps cut down the distance between the narrative and the readers and increase the dramatic quality of it.

This brings us to the second mode or what we could call the dramatic mode of presentation in which Huck's experiences come through to us directly without having passed through his consciousness. Huck's meeting with Judge Thatcher in chapter 4 is an example. His meeting with Jim on Jackson's Island is even more to the point. Here is part of the narration:

By and by Jim says:

But looky here, Huck, who wuz it dat 'uz killed in dat shanty, ef it warn't you?

Then I told him the whole thing and he said it was smart. He said Tom Sawyer couldn't get up no better plan than what I had. Then I says: 'How do you come to be here, Jim, and how'd you get here?'

He looked pretty uneasy, and didn't say nothing for a minute. Then he says:

'Maybe I better not tell?'

Why, Jim?

Well, dey's reasons. But you wouldn't tell on me ef I 'uz to tell you, would you, Huck?

Blamed if I would, Jim.

Well, I b'lieve you, Huck. I--I run off.

'Jim!'

'But mind, you said you wouldn't tell--you know you said you wouldn't tell, Huck.'

Well, I did. I said I wouldn't, and I'll stick to it. Honest injun I will. People would call me a low down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum--but that don't make no difference. I ain't going to tell, and I ain't agoing back there anyway. So now, let's know all about it.' (8:57-58)

Such passages are of course not meant to be read in isolation but they unmistakably hit their target. The absence of narrative commentary enables the spontaneity of Huck's promise not to betray Jim as also Jim's trusting nature, to come through to the reader at first hand and with full force. And both these perceptions are crucial to the meaning of the novel.

Critics have pointed out some difficulties with the narrative.

First, in two cases Huck the retrospective narrator keeps back the knowledge that he now (in the narrative present) has and presents the events with the limited knowledge that he as a participant had at the time.

In chapter 9 Jim discovers Tom looking into the floating house that Pap Finn is dead but withholds the information till near the end when he breaks the news to Huck (p. 328). Also the information that Miss Watson had freed Jim in her will is kept back by Tom when Huck meets him in Chapter 33. Again Huck the narrator who now has the information conveys at Tom's silence. Of these the second piece of knowledge is more crucial. But I feel that these silences on the part of the narrator could be looked at as part of his presentational strategy. If Huck had disclosed the information that Jim had already been freed it would have diluted the presentation of the intensity of Huck's moral struggle involved in first writing the letter to Miss Watson and then tearing it off. So if Huck the narrator withholds the vital piece of information it is entirely to make the presentation of events rhetorically effective and aesthetically satisfying. These two examples also highlight the essential ambiguity of truth and fiction at the heart of the text.

### 12.5.4 Narrative Irony

Mark Twain's use of an adolescent who has the innocence of a boy and who doesn't always understand his experience completely serves the author's satiric purpose admirably.

The writer's use of irony deserves notice here. "Irony is always the result of a disparity of understanding. In any situation in which one person knows or perceives more--or less--than another, irony must be either actually or potentially present. In any example of narrative art there are, broadly speaking three points of view--those of the characters, the narrator, and the audience. As narrative becomes more sophisticated, a fourth point of view is added by the development of a clear distinction between the narrator and the author. Narrative irony is a function of disparity among these three or four viewpoints. And narrative artists have always

The disparity between the traditional viewpoint voiced by the essentially naive Huck and the humanistic viewpoint of the author implied here makes a damning comment on the racist society that poisons even young minds.

It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, 'Give a nigger an inch, and he'll take an ell.' . . . Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children - children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. (16:108 italics added).

Twain's comment on the pieties of women like Widow Douglas and Miss Watson made through Huck the narrator would lose half their force if he had made them directly. What Huck does here is to defamiliarize the practice of saying grace and look at it afresh. An even better example of the narrative irony in the service of satire is Huck's reaction to Jim's talk of being free as their raft neared Cairo.

The Widow Takes Huck to Church



The widow rung a bell for supper and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there wasn't really anything the matter with them" (1:11-2). (emphasis added)

In the case of *Huckleberry Finn* the irony resulting from the disparity of understanding between the author and the boy narrator makes Mark Twain's satire far more effective than it would have been if he had made his comments directly. Paragraph 3 of chapter 1 offers an example:

been ready to employ this disparity to make effects of various kinds" (The Nature of Narrative, p. 240).

This narrative irony contributes a great deal to the pleasure we derive from reading narrative literature.

### 12.5.5 Popular Elements in the Narrative

One of the several factors that account for the continuing popularity of *Huckleberry Finn* is the presence of folk motifs in the novel. A major motif in it is the quest motif (Death and rebirth is another). And this could be traced in the novel with the help of the categories of characters suggested by V. Propp in his *Morphology of a Folktale*. Propp believes that a folk tale has seven characters each of whom embodies a function or role—villain, donor, helper, the sought for person, dispatcher, hero and false hero. Though not all of these character types can be spotted in the novel, one could find close approximations of hero and false hero in Huck and Tom respectively. If the quest in the novel is for freedom, then Huck could be called a hero, (or an anti hero) who is also a helper because he tries to secure freedom for Jim. On the other hand, Tom is the false hero because he arrogates to himself the heroic role of Jim's emancipator and in the process puts him to avoidable torture and indignity. As for villain, several characters seem to fit the role—Miss Watson whose plan to sell Jim alarms him and induces him to run away, and Pap Finn and the king and the duke.



"Now, Jim, You're a Free Man."

The other major motif is the motif of rebirth that runs almost through the length of the narrative. These underlying threads help to unify the narration internally.

Another popular element which Twain was familiar with and which he incorporated in the narrative is the tall tale, tricks and yarns. A tall tale is "a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdote which challenges the listener's credulity with comic outlandishness." Two clear examples of tall tales are the tales

told by the so-called king and the duke to each other in the presence of Huck and Jim. These tales are principally meant to impress them both and they certainly succeed in inducing them to agree to wait upon the royalty but they also ironically succeed in exposing them to be frauds to Huck. In contrast to their wicked tricks and yarnspinning is the innocent yarnspinning of Huck who has to invent yarns on the spur of the moment for the purpose of survival throughout the book.

### 12.6 LET US SUM UP

As we have seen, the narrative puts a premium on truth and realism. Tom's book-derived romanticism stands rejected. By the time we reach chapter 31 the entire trajectory of the narrative prepares us to expect the final steps towards securing Jim's freedom. But the ending of the novel with Tom's over-elaborate romantic plan to free the already free Jim comes as a big setback. Jim's story doesn't end as we expect it to. Is this a defect in the novel? If the story had ended as expected, wouldn't it have been a fairy tale ending? Seen in the context of the status of African Americans in America, isn't the present ending a truer, more realistic ending?

### 12.7 GLOSSARY

#### narrative

A working definition of narrative is given by the Oxford English Encyclopedic Dictionary as a spoken or written account of connected events in order of happening. Events are indispensable to a narrative.

#### Picaresque novel

A novel that gives a first person account of the travels of a character, originally a picaresque or rogue.

#### evasion

a corruption of the French word evasion, or escape; Tom uses it in order to describe the escapes of a prisoner: "When a prisoner of style escapes, it's called an evasion. It's always called so when a king escapes, for instance." Huckleberry Finn (39:302). This term is also used in the last chapter. (see p.327)

### 12.8 QUESTIONS

1. Point out the narrative irony in the following passage (ch.31, p.240) "Once I said to myself..... goes to everlasting fire".  
Hint: What is Huck's intention in these reflections?  
What does the passage achieve at the end?  
What is the target of criticism in it?
2. Analyse the following passage pointing out the narrative strategy employed in its different parts (ch.25, p. 189).  
"Then one of them...turns loose and goes to crying fit to burst."
3. Pick out passages where Huck the narrator speaks to the readers directly.
4. Make a list of events presented dramatically without comment by the narrator.

## 12.9 FURTHER READING

- Wecter, Dixon, *Sam Clemens of Hannibal*, Boston 1952, excerpted in Norton critical edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1997.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory*, Oxford: OUP 1997 Chapter 6, pages 83-94 entitled "Narrative."
- Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: OUP, 1966.
- Basic book for the study of narratives in general.
- Twain, Mark. *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*. With an introduction, Notes and Bibliography by Michael Patrick Hearn. New York: Charleson N. Potter, 1981.
- A most useful edition to consult. Notes are particularly useful.

**UNIT 13 THEMES AND CHARACTERIZATION IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN**

**Structure**

13.0	Objectives
13.1	Introduction
13.2	Theme(s)
13.3	Twain's Art of Characterization
13.3.1	The characterization of Huck
13.3.1.1	Huck in <i>Tom Sawyer</i>
13.3.1.2	Sources in Mark Twain's Life
13.3.1.3	Huck
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13.3.2	The Characterization of Jim
13.3.2.1	Source in Mark Twain's Life
13.3.2.2	Jim
13.4	The Ending of <i>Huckleberry Finn</i>
13.5	Let Us Sum Up
13.6	Glossary
13.7	Assignment
13.8	Further Reading

**13.0 OBJECTIVES**

As well as providing you with some preliminary information about *Huckleberry Finn*, the Unit offers a perspective on the themes and the characters in it. Apart from the principal theme of freedom and slavery, it discusses other themes and motifs and then goes on to focus on Huck and his moral development. The characterization of Jim will consider the ways in which Mark Twain departs from the stereotype of a negro appearing in fiction and on stage.

**13.1 INTRODUCTION**

Any literary work must be seen both in relation to the life experiences and values of its author and to the socio-cultural context of the time and place in which it remains firmly rooted. This is particularly important in the case of *Huckleberry Finn* which deals with the sensitive issue of slavery.

By the time he came to write *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain had left Hannibal and had settled in Elmira and had outgrown his slave-holding heritage. His friend W.D. Howells called him "the most desouthernized Southerner." However, his presentation of slavery, particularly the way in which Jim is freed in the novel has been faulted.

The background information provided earlier about the author and the age should help you to read the text again and make your own judgement about the book's treatment of slavery and some other issues raised in the book.

**13.2 THEME(S)**

*Huckleberry Finn* has been a happy hunting ground for critics wanting to classify its genre and identify its theme or themes.

Is it a boy's book, a book of travel and adventures? It has long been read as a classic for boys. Or is it a comic book or a book that contains adult social criticism and satire? Or is it a boy's book in the sense of being a book about growing up?

A related and a more important question is: What is the book about? Or, since every important novel is about a number of things the key question is: - What is *Huckleberry Finn* particularly about?

Before you read further, I want you to note down what you consider to be the important themes/motifs in the novel. You could write the theme(s)/motifs singly or in pairs of opposite ideas. My own list would read something like this:

- growing up
- death and rebirth
- romantic imagination versus reality
- civilization versus freedom
- individual versus society
- river versus town

Which of these, according to you, is the principal theme?

Very obviously, the theme of freedom and slavery is the central preoccupation of the book--it is the spine of the novel that gives it strength, though there are other thematic strands intertwined with it.

Freedom in the novel is multidimensional. It of course means physical freedom for both Huck and Jim, Huck from the suffocating 'civilizing' atmosphere at Widow Douglas and from his brutal drunken father, and Jim from chattel slavery. But, it also means freedom from inherited prejudices--which is what Huck achieves in relation to Jim at the end.

For Huck freedom also means freedom from the constraints of civilized society. Tom has. He wants to be able to plough a lonely furrow by lighting out for the territory. In other words freedom for Huck is centrifugal--running away from "the security of home to the wilderness of the outside world."

But for Jim freedom means freedom to be reunited with his wife and children. His concept of freedom is centripetal. In more practical terms, Jim is 'free' towards the end having been freed by his owner Miss Watson in her will. But Tom's elaborate plan to 'free' him in style ironically prolongs his slavery and the episode can be read as Twain's recognition of the dubious reality of the meaning of freedom for Negroes even after the abolition of slavery in 1863. Twain seems to be asking - Can Jim ever be free? Also, can Huck really escape civilization? Since freedom for Huck and Jim means different things, Twain seems to be interrogating the idea of freedom/slavery in the novel and he leaves the question open-ended.

This section is necessarily brief because the points suggested above will be dealt with later on also when the characterization of Huck and Jim is considered. But one can see how the other themes and motifs are intertwined with the chief theme. For instance the idea of individual liberty and social conformity is closely connected with the larger theme of freedom and slavery. This theme is realized through the character of Huck who values his liberty above the demands of society. A non-conformist, his individualism needs to be distinguished from what Shulman has described as the romantic individualism of Tom, the anarchic individualism of his father Pap Finn and the acquisitive individualism of the king and the duke. And it coexists with a very sensitive social conscience. Moreover, Huck spends some of the best moments of his life in perfect communion with Jim on the raft. In this respect Twain is probably

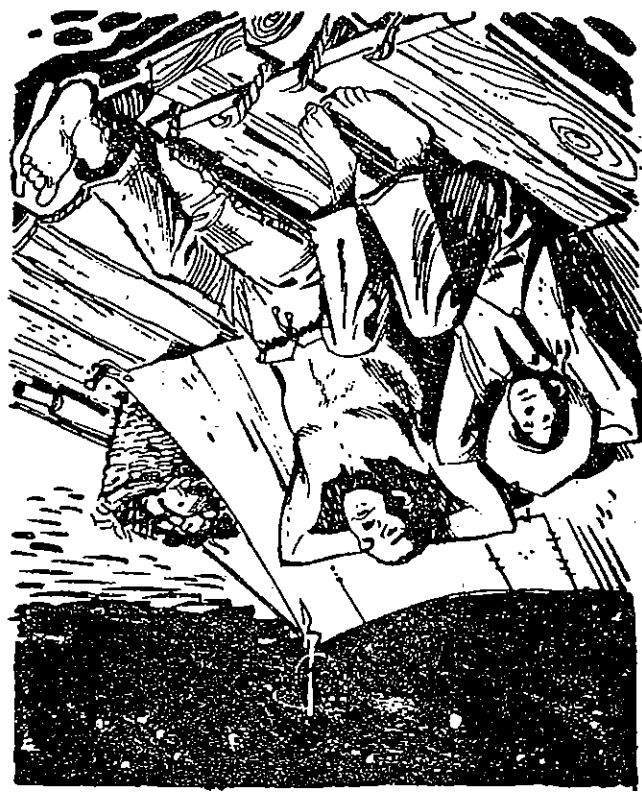


Huck however remains essentially a loner and when he finds the freedom to be and to do as he likes threatened by Aunt Sally's decision to adopt and 'civilize' him, he makes up his mind to light out for the territory in search of non-civilized freedom.

Here Twain can be seen spelling out another sub-theme--that of civilization versus nature. What does civilization mean in the novel? It means conformism, respectability and bookish piety and it coexists with acceptance of slavery. Witness the aristocracy or the planter class represented in the novel by the Grangerford whose pretence of civilized values depends parasitically upon the labour of hundreds of niggers. Nature on the other hand stands for untutored innocence, absence of hypocrisy and instinctive sympathy towards those in trouble. In the opposition between the two the novel satirizes civilization and leans heavily towards nature. But the dichotomy is not absolute. For civilization is not always devalored in the novel as is clear from the episode involving Pap Finn. Pap Finn lives in the midst of nature and denounces education and stands up for slavery.

Another sub-theme that is tangentially linked to the idea of freedom and slavery is the opposition between imagination and reality. This sub-theme emerges through the novel's structure which is framed, as it were, by romantic episodes at each end in sharp contrast to the reality of the middle section. In Chapter 3 Huck rejects Tom's bookish romanticism and his imaginings as lies. "I got an old tin lamp and an iron ring and went out in the woods and rubbed and rubbed till I sweat like an Injun, calculating to build a palace and sell it; but it wasn't no use none of the genies come. So then I judged that all that stuff was only one of Tom Sawyer's lies. I reckoned he believed in the Arabs and the elephants, but as for me I think different" (3:26, italics added).

Discussing Stars



suggesting the possibility of individualism which is inseparable from rather than opposed to community.

Themes and Characterization

Likewise Huck sees little sense in Tom's over-elaborate romantic plan to free Jim, though he falls in line with it eventually. When Huck calls Tom's plan of digging the foundation of Jim's cabin foolish, Tom persists with his romantic plan invoking the authority of the printed word: "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way--and it's the regular way. And there ain't no other way, that I ever heard of and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things. They always dig out with a case knife . . . And it takes them weeks and weeks and weeks, and for ever and ever" (35:274-75).

Tom's romantic plan stands condemned not only because it willfully imagines difficulties where there are none but also because of his utter indifference to the torture and humiliation Jim has to undergo.

*Huckleberry Finn* is a thematically rich text and this discussion does not exhaust all the possibilities.

I suggest that you work out some of the sub-themes suggested above in greater details on your own.

### 13.3 TWAIN'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION

Since Huck is both a first person narrator and the central consciousness in the novel, we not only get to know every other character in the novel as they filter through his consciousness but also himself very intimately.

A preliminary question to ask is: How has the novelist presented his central character(s) in *Huckleberry Finn*?

At some stage in your study this question should turn into a general enquiry also-- How do novelists present their characters? How, for instance, does Hawthorne present his characters? Comparison and contrast always help to bring out the similarities and differences between the authors sharply and to fix them in the mind.

#### 13.3.1 The Characterization of Huck

Before discussing Huck's character in the novel, it will be helpful to go back to *Tom Sawyer* and see how Huck has been presented there and also to examine the sources of his character in Mark Twain's life.

##### 13.3.1.1 Huck in *Tom Sawyer*

. . . the juvenile pariah of the village . . . son of the town drunkard. *Huckleberry* was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town because he was idle and lawless, and vulgar, and bad--and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society, and wished they dared to be like him . . . the romantic outcast.

(6: )

#### Exercises

1. What I want you to do now is to see in what way Huck in *Huckleberry Finn* is similar to this description and how he is different.

The extract describes him as 'idle,' 'lawless,' 'vulgar,' and 'bad.' Fasten on each of these terms and see if you can use them for Huck in this novel.

Huckleberry Finn



13.3.13 Huck

Much of what we can say about Huck has been anticipated in Unit 2 while dealing with him as a narrator. Since Huck as the central consciousness is not always aware of the full significance of his experiences, the writer makes use of irony resulting from the discrepancy between the narrator's point of view and the author's point of view to convey his view of character.

Clearly Mark Twain was drawing upon his childhood memories for his Huck. This unorthodox boy, however, eventually ended up as a respectable "justice of peace in a remote village of Montana."

According to Dixon Vector, Tom Blankenship with whom Sam had played as a boy was the prototype for Huck Finn. In Mark Twain's words, "Tom was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as ever any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person-boy or man in the community . . . We liked him; we enjoyed his society. And as his society was forbidden us by our parents, the prohibition trebled and quadrupled its value, and therefore we sought and got more of his society than of any other boy's." (Norton:279, Italics added)

13.3.12 Sources in Mark Twain's Life

Huck is the first person narrator in this novel as he was not in *Tom Sawyer*. What effect does this new strategy have on your reactions to Huck as you assess his character?

Themes and  
Characterization

It is easy to romanticize the character of Huck. His age--he is a teenager, his innocence, and spontaneity that go with it, his being on the fringe of society and the absence of any pretensions to respectability--all this coupled with his promise to help Jim escape and their river journey on a raft are good enough material for a romantic view of Huck. Some of the positive epithets used to describe him are: heroic, a picaresque saint, an imagist poet. He is also described as a Prometheus, a frontier Thoreau, a Mississippi Moses, a Tocquevillian hero. It is therefore important for us to see Huck for what he is.

One could start off by saying that Huck is something of a sceptic. This scepticism coupled with his naivete help him examine what elders say afresh. For instance, he does not accept what Miss Watson says about Providence and the efficacy of prayers. Tom's romantic fiction of Spaniards and rich Arabs also leave him cold. But the same boy is superstitious almost as much as Jim.

Huck's matter-of-factness goes along with a decided lack of sentimentality or 'sentimentering' as he calls it. In the Wilks episode he is clear sighted enough to see through the 'slush' and 'hogwash' of the king's eulogy of Peter Wilks. But this does not prevent him from rating the immature drawing and the poetry of Emmeline as very good.

His honesty is a most important feature of his character but he makes no fetish of it. His pragmatism is clear in his repeated lying in order to get out of tight corners and also to help others to do so. Lying in fact is part of his strategy/for survival in a world which is hostile and where truth telling is risky. Survival is also what induces him (and Jim) to borrow things like watermelons from riverside fields though Huck is aware of the thin line that separates 'borrowing' from stealing ('Pap always said it wasn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime, but the widow said it wasn't anything but a soft name for stealing and no decent body would do it" (12:82).



Borrowing Watermelon and Corn

Perhaps the best feature of Huck's character is his sympathy which is at once spontaneous and unsentimental for those in trouble. When he sees lights burning late at night, he is put in mind of sick folks. The sight of a supposedly drunken man in the circus who tries to ride a horse delights the audience but makes him feel miserable. (It wasn't funny to me, though. I was all of a tremble to see his danger" 22:173.) When he realizes that the men trapped in the wrecked steamboat *Walter Scott* are doomed to die, he considers "how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix" (13:89). This basic kindness takes a more active form when he cannot playact as a valet to the king any longer in the Wilks episode and discloses the true identity of the two frauds to Mary Jane. But if he saves her and the rest of the family from the cheats, he also feels deeply anguished at the tar and feathers punishment given to them ("I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be so kind to one another" (33:260). This is charity at its highest. The paradox is that for all his dislike of civilization, Huck is a deeply social being whose sense of responsibility makes him the least carefree of boys. This aspect comes out in his relationship with Jim.

### 13.3.1.4 Huck's Moral Development

Critics have referred to *Huckleberry Finn* and rightly--as a novel of education, recording the moral growth of Huck. He has been called a lifelong learner and explorer of new territories.

His moral development takes the form of his emancipation from inherited prejudices relating to slavery, which is heavily dependent on his realization of Jim's essential humanity. Several decisions are crucial in this process.

His first decision is made very early in the novel when, a runaway from civilization himself, he promises not to tell on Jim. ("People would call me a lowdown Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum--but that don't make no difference. I ain't a-going to tell, and I ain't a-going back there anyway" (8:58). This decision is spontaneous--these words are spoken casually on the spur of the moment and are not an after-thought of Huck the narrator and marks the beginning of his community with Jim ("I was ever so glad to see him. I wasn't lonesome now"). It also constitutes an act of quiet defiance of the mores of a slave-holding society represented on the one hand by Miss Watson who would sell her slave and on the other by Pap Finn who though poor himself resents the superior education of a free negro.

Huck's decision to humble himself before Jim for playing a practical joke on him is a momentous step in his spiritual progress. It is so because it leads to another momentous decision of his to save Jim from the slave hunters. The joke consisted in making Jim believe that their separation during the fog was all a dream and it springs from a settled belief that negroes were inferior creatures and were 'natural' objects of fun. At first Jim is taken in by Huck but later when things sink in he replies in a speech which is marked at once by righteous indignation and hurt pride that Huck has tried to humiliate a friend. Huck is truly repentant.

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger--but I done it, and I wasn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd aknowed it would make him feel that way.

(15:105)

Huck's decision to fool the slave hunters with a tale of smallpox and save Jim is a logical conclusion. But this decision is not arrived at without a battle between the promptings of his heart and the voice of his 'deformed conscience.' As Huck and Jim near Cairo, Jim anticipating his freedom gets to be jumpy and excited. But this fills Huck with dread for it dawns upon him that he is conspiring at the escape of a slave

who is someone else's property ("Conscience says to me, 'what had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word?' 16:107). His misery increases when Jim talks of securing the release of his wife and children by stealing if necessary ("I think I this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was the nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children--children that belonged to a man I didn't even know, a man that hadn't done me no harm") (16:108). But eventually his human instincts prove more powerful than his belief in the sanctity of property in human flesh and he takes the right decision to save Jim. Huck's assurance to the slave hunters that he "won't let no runaway niggers get by me if I can help it" points up his moral dilemma for the fact is that he can't help taking the right decision.

Huck's process of re-education has well and truly begun. And one of the ghosts of the racist society that bedevils Huck's companionship with Jim is exorcised. It is natural that there should be greater intimacy even physical intimacy between the two. On return to the river from the bloody feud of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons Huck feels that "nothing ever sounded so good" like Jim's voice, and "Jim he grabbed me, and hugged me, he was so glad to see me" (18:137). It is at this point that they feel "there warn't no home like a raft" suggesting an idyllic non-racist community of two lazing along the river naked on a raft.

The new closeness is evident in three ways--one, his appreciation of the way in which Jim keeps a vigil in his place, two, his recognition of the common humanity that binds them, and three, Jim's sharing of his daughter Elizabeth's story with Huck.

I went to sleep, and Jim didn't call me when it was my turn. He often done that. When I waked up, just at day-break, he was sitting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself. . . . He was thinking about his wife and children, away up yonder and he was low and homesick; because he hadn't ever been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural but I reckon it's so. (23:179)

Huck's moral development is rather spiral than linear for his final struggle with his conscience covers much the same ground as his preceding combat except that the problem presents itself to him in religious terms. This struggle is preceded by Huck's discovery that Jim has been sold by the king for 'forty dirty dollars' and his subsequent crying:

After all this long journey, and after all we'd done for them scoundrels here was it all come to nothing; everything all busted up, and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and among strangers too, for forty dirty dollars (31:240).

Huck's struggle with his conscience is more intense this time because the punishment for helping Jim escape is dreadful--he will go to hell (. . . "people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire" p.241). He writes a letter to Miss Watson and feels lighter for a moment but when he recalls his relationship with Jim and their moments of togetherness on the raft, he takes the plunge:

I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and . . . would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I stuck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend

old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it.

I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right then, I'll go to hell'--and tore it up. (31:241-42)

Once again Huck's innate goodness has triumphed over the mores of the slave-holding society he has internalized.

The ending of the novel has dissatisfied many people for Huck here is not the Huck he has developed into. But though in these chapters he concedes the leadership to Tom, there is no wavering on his part on what he has set his mind to--the freeing of Jim: "When I start in to steal a nigger, I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What want is my nigger. . . ." And he falls in line with Tom, he does so reluctantly, which means his heart is in the right place.

### 13.3.2 The Characterization of Jim

I hope reading of *Huckleberry Finn* has enabled you to form your own impressions of Jim. Before you read on, I want you to do this exercise.

Given below is a list of words some of which could be applied for Jim.

- (a) Tick off those that you think could be applied to him.
- (b) Identify at least one illustrative example for each one you choose.

carting, ignorant, superstitious, kind, loyal, dignified, logical, generous, brave.

### 13.3.2.1 Source in Mark Twain's Life

In his *Sam Clemens of Hannibal*, Dixon Vector gives the following information regarding a prototype for Jim.



Jim-Miss Watson's Slave

But the most memorable servant of the Quarleses [the family of Clever's uncle, John Quarles, of Florida, Missouri] was middle-aged Uncle Dan'l, sensible, honest, patient, the children's comrade in adventure, their adviser and ally in time of trouble. "It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race," wrote Mark, "and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities." Vector goes on to say how Uncle Dan'l became the acknowledged original of Huck Finn's friend "Nigger Jim," whose unshakable loyalty, generous heart, and unconscious dignity--even when Huck makes game of his credulity--raise him to the rank of Mark Twain's noblest creations."

13.2.2 Jim

Like Huck, Jim too has been romanticized and has been presented as a larger-than-life figure. In one view both Huck and Jim "are related to the demigods of the river, to the barbarous primitivism of the Negro, and beyond that to the archetypal primitives of the Golden Age, instinctively good, uncorrupted by reason, living close to nature and more influenced by its portents than by the conventions of civilization" (Miller:100). Another critic turns him into a walking myth--"the great residue of primitive, fertile force." Jim has even been praised for being superstitious. It is therefore important to view Jim objectively.

For this a helpful lead has been provided by A.N. Kaul who goes back to the work of some apologists for slavery in the South, like George Fitzhugh and who describes what these apologists have called the Sambo personality. In his monograph entitled History, Sociology and the American Romance, Kaul says:

Sociologists like George Fitzhugh had developed a theory of black personality popularly shorthand as "Sambo". They rejected the notion of a separate species. . . Blacks were human but infantile. They had their good points, but it was sheer sentimentality to attribute to them mature qualities as, for instance, sustained purpose or durable relationships. Hence the non-sanctity of black marriage and the supposed painlessness of family break-up when husbands or parents were sold one way and wives or children the other. The black or Sambo was essentially improvident, gullible, irresponsible--a "grown up child," in Fitzhugh's phrase, totally dependent on parental, that is to say slave-master's absolute authority. (Kaul:34)

This longish excerpt about the Sambo personality throws considerable light on the characterization of Jim. In the modern world, Kaul suggests the Sambo personality would be attributed not to a defect in the genes but to conditioning. The slave-master's authority over the life of the slave was absolute going beyond the authority of father over the son. "It included, not just the authority to chastise, but the power to dispose off the slave in any manner, to dictate (not just regulate) the mode of his life, his work, his family and sexual power. . . ." ( : 35). It was the exercise of this absolute power that made the victim infantile. This insight should enable us to view Jim's infantile behaviour as being a result of conditioning and social heredity than an expression of his true or natural personality.

To begin with, Jim is presented as Miss Watson's slave, superstitious and gullible, who is a butt of Tom Sawyer's jokes. Tom hangs Jim's hat on a tree while he [Jim] is asleep and Jim comes to believe that the witches put him in a trance and rode him all over the state. The story becomes increasingly dramatic with each telling, with the result that Jim becomes a sort of 'celebrity' among the negroes. Clearly, in presenting Jim as something of a comic figure, Mark Twain has used the available stereotype of a negro. But the writer also shows that given the right opportunity, atmosphere and challenge, the same Jim emerges with a new dignity and human capacity, leaving the stereotype mask behind.

Jim's positive qualities begin to show up as he and Huck meet in the Jackson's Island. This relationship is one of mutual dependence. If Huck promises not to tell on Jim



and later saves him from his captors, Jim acts as a protector of Hück, almost a surrogate father. This role begins on the island itself where his folk wisdom regarding young birds saves Hück from the storm that lashes the place. Later he builds a wigwam on the raft, which amounts to providing a 'home' to Hück.

During the journey he shields Hück from the ghastly sight of Pap Finn's dead body by showing great delicacy of feeling and discretion. Protective as a father, he often "didn't call me when it was my turn" (Chapter 23).

The incident that helps most to establish Jim's humanity is when he deeply regrets beating his 4-year-old daughter Elizabeth when she did not shut the door without realizing that she was deaf and dumb.

But Jim's finest moment comes when he reacts to Hück's practical joke after the fog with great dignity charging Hück with nothing more or less than a violation of the code of friendship. At first Jim is taken in by Hück's mischievous suggestion that there was no fog and that he had dreamed up the whole incident. But he soon recovers his humanity. In this scene one can see him moving out of the stereotype and becoming a human being capable of dignity and emotion and loyalty.

### 13.4 THE ENDING OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

The last 12 chapters (from Ch.32 to Ch.42) concerning the rescue of Jim from captivity at the Phelps's farm constitute the ending of the novel. They begin with Hück's dismay at the selling of his soul-mate and his entry into the Phelps's farm in search of him and end with Jim's final rescue and Hück's subsequent decision to light out for the territory in search of freedom.



Huck Meets Mr. Phelps

There has been a great deal of disagreement about the appropriateness of the ending. Among those who have justified the ending are Lionel Trilling and T.S. Eliot who have done so on formal or other grounds. While Trilling concedes that there is a "falling off" in the final episode containing the elaborate game of Jim's escape, he thinks the novel has a "formal aptness" with Huck returning to "his anonymity which he prefers." Eliot defends the ending because "it is right that the mood of the end of the book should bring us back to that of the beginning" (Inge: 110).

On the other hand, there is a widespread dissatisfaction (including among the students) at the way the ending betrays the novel's quest for Jim's freedom. Leo Marx faults the ending on three counts: (1) "the flimsy devices of plot," (2) "the discordant farcical tone," and (3) "the disintegration of the major characters." All of these, according to Marx betray the failure of the ending. "The dissatisfaction arises from the fact that the trick ending involves a sudden change of heart in the slave owner Miss Watson, which is unexplained and which seems to trivialize the serious issue of freedom for the slave. This has the effect of turning the enemy into a friend, "the oppressor [into] "the liberator," as A.N. Kaul puts it. The farcical tone also has the effect of dissipating the seriousness of the novel's business. And there is a slideback in the principal character when Huck accepts Tom's leadership and Jim submits himself to all the humiliation heaped upon him by Tom.

The ending of the novel may not be well rounded but it is I think a true reflection of the state of the slave after the formal emancipation was announced in 1863. As is well known, the Emancipation did not mean the disappearance of slavery and the attitudes that went with it.

The emancipation was followed by a brief period of reconstruction which in turn was followed by the compromise of 1877. This last led to a reaction in the form of Jim Crow laws which denied basic civil rights to the blacks. It was only in 1954 when Justice Warren rejected segregation in schools that a near-apartheid situation eased a little for them. If the ending of the novel is read against the background of what happened to the blacks in America, it will not appear to be as arbitrary and willful as it may otherwise do.

Mark Twain published the novel over 20 years after the Emancipation of 1863 but he had had the prescience of a great writer to read the signs of the times and to look into the future. The novel could be read as Mark Twain's satiric comment on those who wielded power and who willfully delayed delivering to them what they had agreed to give them.

As for Huck, though he concedes the leadership to Tom (Don't the best lack all conviction?) he is wise to reason why Tom had agreed to help Huck free Jim--

And his Aunt Polly she said Tom was right about old Miss Watson setting Jim free in her will; and so, sure enough, Tom Sawyer had gone and took all that trouble and bother to set a free nigger free! and I couldn't ever understand, before, until that minute and that talk, how he could help set a nigger free, with his bringing up

(42:325)

This comment constitutes a very severe indictment of all the drama Tom has staged in 'freeing' Jim. For Tom it was all self-indulgence and fun.

So far as Jim is concerned, he tends to get back into his Sambo image but in his loyalty to the injured Tom he outshines every other character in the novel and in spite of his docility and patience he manages to retain an individuality of his own.

chattel is a moveable possession, any possession or piece of property other than real estate. So chattel slavery is a system wherein the slave belongs to his/her owner.

chattel slavery:

## 13.6 GLOSSARY

One source of the enduring appeal of the book lies in the Huck-Jim relationship. The controversial ending of the novel may appear to be a setback to Jim's quest for freedom but it will make better sense if it is seen against the historical experience of the blacks in America.

I used the phrase the twin theme of freedom and slavery in the beginning advisedly because Huck's freedom is heavily dependent on Jim's emancipation and his moral growth is incomplete without his acceptance, the humanity of the black man without reservation.

Mark Twain's engagement in *Huckleberry Finn* is principally with the twin theme of freedom-and-slavery, though he interweaves sub-themes like imagination and reality, civilization and nature, and individual and society with it. During the course of his exploration he asks what it means to be free and also what it means to be a slave. The issue is complex for freedom means different things for Huck and Jim and both freedom and slavery are projected in the novel as objectives that are not quite easy to achieve.

## 13.5 LET US SUM UP

Aunt Polly Appears



**stereotype:** a person or thing that conforms to an unjustifiably fixed usually standardized mental picture. (Also a printing plate cast from a mould of composed type.)

**burlesque:** mock-serious; comic imitation especially in parody of a dramatic or literary work.

**Reconstruction:** Reconstruction Acts passed by the US Congress required the giving of the vote to Blacks.

**Jim Crow Laws:** laws passed by the Southern states of the US laying down the policy of segregating and discriminating against Blacks. (Originated from the refrain 'jump-Jim-Crow' of a plantation song.)

### 13.7 ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the twin theme of freedom-and-slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*.

2. Describe in some detail how Huck wrestled with his conscience on learning that Jim had been sold to Phelps' plantation and bring out its distinctive character.

3. In the burlesque closing chapters, Jim--whom the readers "have come to love and admire--becomes a cartoon figure and the victim of meaningless tortures." Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer. What reasons can you suggest Twain may have had for the protracted terminal chapters?

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## UNIT 14 LANGUAGE IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Structure

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### 14.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to pay close attention to an important aspect of *Huckleberry Finn's* achievement, namely its language and to study how it contributes to the total effect of the book and also account for its tremendous popularity over the years.

### 14.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1776 American colonies became politically independent. But it took more than a century for American literature to become linguistically independent. This declaration came with the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884 in which the American vernacular was "first used as the medium of great fiction."

Mark Twain's strategy to allow a 14-year-old uneducated white boy to tell his own story in his own language accomplished a quiet revolution in the world of letters in America. American literature was never the same afterwards. It was probably to his innovative use of dialect among other things, that Hemingway was referring when he called *Huckleberry Finn* "the best book we've had" and when he traced all American writing to it. "There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

### 14.2 MARK TWAIN ON WRITING

Mark Twain was passionately interested in the problem of style, said Lionel Trilling in his introduction to the Rinehart Edition of *Huckleberry Finn* and went on to add: "The mark of the strictest literary sensibility is everywhere to be found in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*." Since style forms such an important part of the total effect of the novel, it will be useful to summarize Mark Twain's views on the art of writing as expressed in his essays and letters.

That he was a highly conscious artist and that he took great pains in using different dialects in the novel is clear from one of the two notices printed at the start of the novel:

In this book a number of dialects are used. To wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremist form of the backwoods south-western dialect; the ordinary "pike-county" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.

The excerpt also makes patent Twain's reliance of the spoken idiom of the people.

Mark Twain's style reflects his hatred for pretence and pretentiousness. "Affectation in all its myriad aspects was ever abhorrent to him, and what he most relished in an author was a straightforward concreteness of presentation. We may be sure that he would have approved Bruenhilde's assertion that "a good writer is simply one who says all he means to say, who says only what he means to say, and who says it exactly as he meant to say it."

Mark Twain was furious with James Fenimore Cooper the author of *Leatherstocking Tales* for what he called his literary offences which included offences of style. He laid down 7 rules for good writing each of which he thought was violated in *The Deerstayer*. Good writing, according to Twain, requires that "an author shall say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it; use the right word, not its second cousin; eschew surplusage; not omit necessary details; avoid slovenliness of form; use good grammar; and employ a simple and straightforward style."

Another writer he was critical of was Walter Scott. In a letter (1903) to Brander Matthews he asked a series of questions about Scott's style, which he obviously held to be unanswerable:

Are there in Sir Walter Scott's novels passages done in good English-English which is neither slovenly nor involved? Are there passages whose English is not poor and thin and commonplace, but of a quality above that? Did he know how to write English, and didn't do it because he didn't want to? Did he use the right word only when he couldn't think of another one, or did he run so much to wrong because he didn't know the right one when he saw it?

The spate of queries serves to emphasize the strict standards Mark Twain had set for himself. Using the right word was for him a most important skill.

Twain put the greatest value on the use of the right word or what he called 'that elusive and shifty grain of gold.' The difference between the almost right word and the right word, he said, was a large matter. . . "it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." It "lights the reader's way and makes it plain . . . Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt." No wonder Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is a triumph of style, a living proof of his consummate care with words.

### 14.3 LANGUAGE IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

#### 14.3.1 Contrast with *The Scarlet Letter*

(i) Since it was Mark Twain who established the use of colloquial language for serious literary purposes in American literature, it would be a good idea to start with comparing and contrasting his language in *Huckleberry Finn* with Hawthorne's language in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Given below are four extracts, two each from *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Examine them carefully and note the difference between them.

- (1) The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in the vicinity of Corn-hill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot.

(SL, Ch. 1).

- (2) Walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism, Mr. Dimmesdale reached the spot, where, now so long since, Hester Prynne had lived through her first hour of public ignominy. The same platform or scaffold, black and weather-stained with the storm or sunshine of seven long years, and foot-worn too, with the tread of many culprits who had since ascended it, remained standing beneath the balcony of the meeting house. The minister went up the steps. (SL, Ch. XII)

- (3) Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful; but it wasn't no use: I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. (HF, Ch. 1)

- (4) The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on other side—you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softens up, away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away . . . it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by-and-by you could see a streak on the water . . . (HF, Ch. XIX)

Hawthorne's language is British English and standard literary language and has the elegance associated with it. He is not using the spoken language of the people. Twain on the other, uses Huck's dialect for serious literary purposes and his sustained use of it for the entire length of novel is one of the chief delights of the book.

But though Huck's language is close to spoken English of rural Southwest America, Mark Twain has not created it merely by copying the speech pattern of a young semi-literate white boy. Used by the writer to replace the traditional literary style, it itself is a new literary style and utmost care has gone into its fashioning. Mark Twain has apparently done a lot of stitching and unstitching though when we read the final product we are carried away by the apparent effortless of Huck's narration. Implicit in this is the recognition that the narrator is naive and untutored. Such a recognition is imperative when Huck is the eye-witness narrator-participant in the novel and has to take the readers along.

### 14.3.2 Identifying Characters by their Language

Having talked about the innovative use of colloquial English in *Huckleberry Finn*, it is time to examine how Mark Twain has used language to create characters. The

language note at the start of the novel suggests that characters speak differently, which means we should be able to identify a character in the way he/she speaks.

Here is an exercise I want you to do.

Exercise

Given below are several excerpts from the book. Read them and see if you can identify the speaker. Also decide what it is that enables you to identify the speaker. Is it syntax, the arrangement of words in the sentence? Or is it a grammatic habit? Or a habit of pronunciation? Try to be as specific as you can.

- (i) I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold?—that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now--that's a specimen. They call that a government that can't sell a tree nigger till he's been in the State six months. Here's a government that calls itself a government, and lets on to be a government, and thinks it is a government, and yet is got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling thieving, infernal, white-shirted tree nigger, and--
- (ii) 'Yes--en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn't want no mo'!
- (iii) 'you'd & ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittin mos' drowned too, dat you would, ha.... Chickens knows when its gwine to rain, en so do de birds, chile.'
- (iv) 'Blame de pint? I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de real pint is down furdur--it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one er two chillen; is dat man gwine to be wasteful O' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. He know how to value em. But you take a man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. He as soon chop a chile, in two as a cat. Dey's plenty me. A chile or two, mo'er less, warn't no consensens to Sollermun dad fetch him!'
- (v) Well, the men gathered around, and sympathized with them, and said all sorts of kind things to them, and carried their carpet-bags up the hill for them, and let them lean on them and cry, and told the king all about his brother's last moments, and the king he told it all over again on his hands to the duke, and both of them took on about that dead tanner like they'd lost the twelve disciples. Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger.
- (vi) 'Yes, it is good enough for me; it's as good as I deserve; for who fetched me so low, when I was so high? I did myself. I don't blame you, gentlemen--far from it; I don't blame anybody. I deserve it all. Let the cold world do its worst; one thing I know--there's a grave somewhere for me. The world may go on just as its always done, and take everything from me--loved ones, property, everything--but it can't take that. Some day I'll lie down in it and forget it all, and my poor broken heart will be at rest.' He went on a-wiping.
- (vii) The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man? Why a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind--as long as it's day-time and you're not behind him.



(viii) 'I say orgies, not because it's the common term, because it ain't--obsequies ain't the common term--but because orgies is the right term. Obsequies ain't used in England no more, now--it's gone out. We say orgies now, in England. Orgies is better, because it means the thing you're after, more exact. It's a word that's made up out'n the Greek orgo outside, open, abroad; and the Hebrew Jeesum, to plant, cover up; hence inter. So, you see, funeral orgies is an open or public funeral.'

(ix) I says to myself, this is another one that I'm letting him rob her of her money. And when she got through, they all jest laid theirselves out to make me feel at home and know I was amongst friends. I feel so ornery and low down and mean, that I says to myself, My mind's made up; I'll hivy that money for them or bust.

(x) It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness-again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warr'n't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might do as well go the whole hog.

(xi) 'Oh, it's de dad--blame witches, sah, en I wisht I was dead, I do. Dey's awluz at it, sah, en dey do mos' kill me, dey sk'yers me so. Please to don't tell nobody 'bout it sah, er ole Mars Silas he'll scole me; 'kase he say dey ain't no witches. I jis' wish to goodness he was heah now--den what would he say! I jis' bet he couldn't fine no way to git aroun' it dis time. But it's awluz jis' so; people dat's sot, stays 'ot; dey won't look into nothin' en fine it out fr deyselves, en when you fine it out en tell um 'bout it, dey doan' b'lieve you.'

(xii) 'Well, some of the best authorities has done it. They couldn't get the chain off, so they just cut their hand off, and shoved. And a leg would be better still. But we got to let that go. There ain't necessity enough in this case; and besides, Jim's is a nigger and wouldn't understand the reasons for it, . . .'

(xiii) 'It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way--and it's the regular way. And there ain't no other way, that ever I heard of, and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things.'

### 14.3.3 Huck's Language

Let's now converge on Huck's language and note the features that characterize it and then compare and contrast it with the language used by other characters.

Here is an exercise for you. Read the following excerpt and write notes on the features that help to identify it.

Now the way the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. We got six thousand dollars apiece--all gold. It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up. Well, Judge Thatcher, he took it and put it out at interest, and it fetched us a dollar a day apiece, all the year round--more than a body could tell what to do with. The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out.

(1:11)

### Features

This paragraph allows us to sample several though not all features that one associates with Huck's style.

1. A principal feature of Huck's style is the use of run-on sentences with the help of coordinate conjunctions such as **and, then, so and so**, with subordination kept to the minimum. This together with simple colloquial diction facilitates a smooth flow of words, that does not get clogged. The cumulative effect of such run-on sentences is to strengthen the impressions of the naive of the narrator and his lack of linguistic-sophistication. There are other idiosyncratic features of Huck's style that deserve notice.

- i) Huck uses a tautology when introducing a subject:
  - Judge Thatcher, he took it . . .
  - Here the subject is repeated.
  - The Widow Douglas, she took me . . .

- ii) Two highly favoured lexical items are **well and by and by** (though the latter does not figure in this excerpt).

- iii) Note the non-standard spellings - **sivilized**.
  - Are there many such spellings in Huck's language?
  - Not many.

- iv) Notice use of double negatives but then this is often characteristic of colloquial English.
  - I couldn't stand it no longer . . .

- v) The verb **allowed** is used in its older sense - affirmed. The Widow Douglas . . . allowed she would sivilize me.

You will be able to spot many more features in Huck's language as you read the novel.

Huck's narrative style is used to achieve a variety of effects. He uses it for lyrical description as in the dawn passage (Ch. 19), for inner wrestling with his conscience over slavery (most notably in ch. 31), for detailed description, for parody and for satire.

#### 14.3.4 A Preliminary Note on African American Language

1. I like to begin by recalling the words of the African American dramatist Leroi Jones about the dual heritage of African American language. It is absurd to assume, as has been the tendency, among a great many Western anthropologists and sociologists that all traces of Africa were erased from the Negro's mind because he learned English. The very nature of English the Negro spoke and still speaks drops the lie on that idea.
2. The scholars today believe that the prolonged contact with European Americans resulted in the African in America adopting some Eurocentric patterns but that both African American Language and African American culture have roots in African patterns. As W.E.B. Dubois put it nearly a century ago in *Souls of Black Folk* (1905), "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro."
3. A principal area in which the uniqueness of African American English (AAE) is evident is in pattern of grammar and pronunciation. Many of these reflect those that operate in West African languages. For example: Many West African languages do not have the English sound *th* and in AAE this sound is represented by the next closest sound as a 'd', a 't', an 'f'.

The parodic appropriation produces the desired effect ("Jim pitied him ever so much, and so did I") and though Huck recognizes them for what they are, both agree to wait upon them as though they were royalty.

Yes, My great-grandfather, elder son of the Duke of Bridgewater, fled to this country about the end of the last century, to breathe the pure air of freedom, married here, and died, leaving a son, his own father dying about the same time . . . and here am I, forlorn, torn from my high estate, hunted of men, despised by the cold world, ragged, worn, heart-broken and degraded to the companionship of felons on a raft! (19:145)

Well, [says the duke] I'd been selling an article to take the tartar off the teeth - and it does take it off, too, and gently the enamel along with it - but I staid about one might longer than I ought to . . . (19:143)

The first example of the use of language as a tool of power relates to the attempt of the frauds to manipulate people through the tall tales they tell. Common both, this manipulation takes two forms. First soon after their rescue by Huck and Jim from the howling mob, they lay claim through the fake titles to the power and status associated with them by appropriating the discourse of the nobility. The switch from one discourse to the other is clear when the two are juxtaposed:

Language has often been used to exert power over others. There are two examples of this in *Huckleberry Finn*.

### 14.4 LANGUAGE AND POWER

2. Which terms of affection does Jim use for Huck in the course of the novel?  
 Well, den, dis is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz him dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boys wuz to get shot, would he say, "Go on en save me, nerrmine 'bout a doctor fr to save dis one?" Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You bet he wouldn't. Well, den, is Jim gwyme to say it? No, sah - I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'bout a doctor, not if it's forty year!" (Ch. 40:309)

1. What I want you to do now is to read the following excerpt from a speech by Jim and write brief grammatical notes about it.

#### 14.3.5 Jim's Language

4. r sound  
 The "r" sound at the end of a word and after a vowel is not heard in AAE. In stead a vowel sound is used e.g. summertime is *summahthime* in AAE.
5. Final and medial consonants  
 These are reduced to a vowel sound or a single consonant sound. Thus child becomes *chile* in AAE.  
 Other examples:  
 Don't becomes *doan*  
 mind *mine*  
 These are a few of the patterns that one could find in African American English.

Secondly, the frauds manage to be fool not only the Wilks family but almost the whole town--at least for a time. In this example they conceal their deceit in a parody of the language of familial love and ceremonial discourse. Listen to the king speaking to the family:

Well, by-and-by the king he gets up and comes forward a little, and works himself up and slobbers out a speech, all full of tears and flappedoodle about its being a sore trial for him and his poor brother to lose the diseased, and to miss seeing diseased alive, after the long journey of four thousand mile, but its a trial that's sweetened and sanctified to us by this dear sympathy and these holy tears, and so he thanks them out of his heart and out of his brother's heart, because out of their mouths they can't, words being too weak and cold, and all that kind of rot and slush, till it was just sickening; and then he blubbers out a pious goody-goody Amen, and turns himself loose and goes to crying fit to bust.

(25:189)

Stylistically this passage is far more complex and uses several devices of language to satirize the king's attempt to defraud the Wilks girls. The following points could be made about it.

- (1) Most of the king's speech is reported indirectly by Huck who is of course the narrator and eye witness, which means that the key words are the king's. More specifically the phrases--a sore trial, poor brother, miss seeing the diseased alive after the long journey of four thousand mile, out of his heart, out of his brother's heart, out of their mouths they can't, words being too weak and cold--are all words of the king. All these formal expressions are part of the vocabulary of love but in the mouth of the king they sound bombastic.
- (2) There is one sentence of the king's that is repeated verbatim - it's a trial that's sweetened and sanctified to us by this dear sympathy and these holy tears.
- (3) Huck both introduces and ends the report about the king's address in the words of his own choice. It is very uncommon for Huck to get angry but here Mark Twain abandons irony and uses direct satire. Huck's own feelings are clear in the phrase - all full of tears and flappedoodle and all that kind of rot and slush.
- (4) Huck's choice of other words is equally significant. He hints at the king's dramatic positioning by using the words - he works himself up and slobbers out a speech and near the end blubbers out a pious goody - goody Amen.
- (5) The king's words are embedded in Huck's sentence. Since Huck uses the simple construction of a run-on sentence, the embedding has the effect of suggesting a contrast between the king's insincere bombast about familial love and Huck's outraged simplicity.

These manipulative attempts by the king and the duke not only expose the frauds but also show the hollowness of the institution of nobility itself. Additionally, these examples have the effect of questioning and displacing the official discourse associated with genteel birth, respectability and honour.

(ii)

Tom is another character who wields the weapon of language to quell questioning and enforce obedience. He has read chivalric romances and he is obsessed with doing things the right way, which means what is prescribed in these books, irrespective of its foolishness or of the suffering it might cause. When Ben Rogers questions the wisdom of ransoming prisoners without knowing what ransom means, Tom says he doesn't know but invokes the authority of books: "I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've

got to do" (2:19). Later when during a discussion of the plan to rescue Jim from slavery Huck questions the need for a rope-ladder, he insists on doing things in a regular way. And he dismisses the suggestion to use a hickory bark ladder instead as 'perfectly ridiculous.' When Huck calls Tom's plan to dig an escape tunnel with case-knives foolish he replies: "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way - and it's the regular way. And these ain't no other way, that ever I heard of, and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things" (35:274).

Later Tom uses the words duty and principle and succeeds in silencing Huck. But the disclosure that Jim's was already free turns the whole into a parody of romantic rescue. What Mark Twain is doing here is to ridicule the whole discourse spun round the authority of books on chivalric romance.

## 14.5 USE OF RACIST LANGUAGE

Mark Twain has been accused of using racist language in *Huckleberry Finn*. According to one count he has used the degrading word *nigger* as many as 211 times in the course of the book. The accusation against the writer seems to stick because of Huck's frequent and apparently unthinking use of it

Significantly Huck uses the term not only in the beginning, before he has learnt to value Jim as a human being but afterwards also. As late as in chapter 42, after the injured Tom and recaptured Jim have been brought in, Huck reports an excited Aunt Sally "scattering order right and left at the niggers." Later Tom's disclosure that Jim is already a free man makes him realize how "he could help a body set a nigger free." Both these instances are particularly neutral occasions when Huck did not need to have use the terms if he did not want to. Earlier in the Phelps farm where he is mistaken for Tom, he fibs about an explosion on the boat.

'Goodness gracious! anybody hurt?'

'No'm-killed a nigger.'

'Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt . . . (32:250)

Aunt Sally's traditional attitude denying humanity to the blacks is understandable but Huck's equally insensitive reply is baffling. Notice that Huck is not the only sympathetic character to use the term; the doctor who treats the injured Tom is another. He has a kind word for Jim who loyally refused to escape to freedom "I never see a nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller, yet he was resking his freedom to do it, and was all tired out, too. . . ." (42:320).

One explanation is that the term was in indiscriminate use in Twain's America and even sensitive people who are sympathetic to the negroes like Huck and the doctor used it without a twinge of conscience. Second, the use of the word could be seen as a hangover of the racist views that he held in his Hannibal days.

Even more offensive is the use of the word as a metaphor for a contemptible person at the end of chapter 24. Huck is commenting on the sob drama the king and the duke put up when they pose to be the brother of Peter Wilks, newly arrived from England.

Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race. (24:187)

Huck who has internalized the colour symbolism - black standing for evil and white for goodness - but when faced with Jim's loyalty says: "I knowed he was white inside" (40:309).

When Pap appears for the first time, his face was white; "not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl - a tree toad white, a fish-belly white" (5:31). This 'white' man is shown resenting an educated negro who was almost white in colour for his proud bearing. This opposition makes nonsense of the dichotomy based on colour.

But if Twain lets Huck use the word *nigger* indiscriminately his use of the colour dichotomy and symbolism shows greater sensitivity. These instances relate to Pap and Jim, one a father, the other a father figure:

The use of the word is highly ironical because Huck is expressing his disgust at the drama the two frauds are staging but he does it by using a term that express a contempt for the negroes. Obviously the term has become a part of Huck's vocabulary.

#### Aunt Sally Talks a Blue Streak





Pap!

### 14.6 LET US SUM UP

Mark Twain's innovative use of Huck's colloquial language constitutes a most important landmark in American literature. The language of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville was formal and 'literary' and at its worst also showy. Twain changed it all by successfully demonstrating that colloquial speech could be used effectively to achieve a variety of literary effects.

But though as Richard Chase says it is close to the spoken idiom of rural, South West America, the language of *Huckleberry Finn* is itself a new literary style. This new style has been consciously cultivated and adapted to meet the requirements of a long story. A self-laughing genius that he was, he laid the utmost emphasis on using the right word in the right place.

Huck's language is described as "an unfallen Adamic dialect." But since he is the narrator also we get to hear through him several other voices. Principal among these in Jim's black dialect which though sometimes called 'realistic' is perhaps more correctly described as "romanticized folk speech." Other voices include the voices of vicious characters like Pap, those who like the king and the duke use language to manipulate people, or who like Tom use it as a tool of power. Mark Twain's use of racist language has been commented upon. But though wholly unconscious, it perhaps shows how even a great writer is limited by his time and place. And yet in spite of this limitation the language of *Huckleberry Finn* remains for a large number of people an unfading source of its appeal that cuts across the boundaries of time and place.

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- Janet Holmgren Mckay. "Tears and Flapdoodle: Point of View and Style in *The Adventures of *Huckleberry Finn**" in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 1910-1980 by Louis J. Budd Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1983, pp.194-201.
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- Dilip Kumar Das. "Language, Ideology and Style in Mark Twain," in *Mark Twain: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, ed. Prafulla C. Kar. Delhi: Pencraft, 1992, pp.60-72.
- Richard Chase. "Mark Twain and the Novel" in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. 1957; rpt. Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1973, pp.139-56.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Going to the Territory*, New York, Vintage Books, 1987, p.110-111.

## 14.9 FURTHER READING

- i) In what way does Huck's language reflect his character?
- ii) Bring out the differences between the language used by the king and the duke.
- iii) How does Tom try to impose himself on Huck?

## 14.8 ASSIGNMENT

### discourse:

can mean a number of things. Essentially it is language in use. In linguistics it means a stretch of language larger than a sentence. Basically it is language which is understood as utterance and thus involves both speakers/writers and also listeners/readers.

A leading black educator is reported to have said: "The white man may not intend *nigger* to be derogatory--but to the black man it is always derogatory and demeaning." Ralph Ellison the author of *The Invisible Man* held that the white immigrants uncertain of their own identity seized upon "the presence of black Americans and used them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the 'outsider' . . . Perhaps one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term *nigger*--it made them feel instantly American." (*Going to the Territory*, 110-111)

The word *nigger* first appears in 1700 in Samuel Sewall's *Diary*, where the word is spelt with only one 'g': "Tis to be feared, we have no other kind of Title to our Nigers." It is a variant form and pronunciation of Negro, a word which originated from the Latin word *niger* for black.

slang is an offensive term of contempt used for Negroes.

### Nigger:

## 14.7 GLOSSARY



## UNIT 15 HUMOUR AND OTHER ISSUES IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

### Structure

15.0	Objectives
15.1	Introduction
15.2	Humour
15.2.1	Humour in Character
15.2.2	Humour in Situation
15.2.3	Humour in Language
15.2.4	Farce
15.2.5	Burlesque
15.2.6	Defining the Limits of Fun
15.3	Intertextuality
15.4	Is <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> a Racist Book?
15.5	Major Critical Approaches to <i>Huckleberry Finn</i>
15.5.1	Criticism during 1885-1950
15.5.2	The Post-1950 Criticism
15.6	Let Us Sum Up
15.7	Glossary
15.8	Assignment
15.9	Further Reading

### 15.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit begins by discussing the different kinds of humour in *Huckleberry Finn* against the background of the work of literary comedians in 19th century America. It then goes on to deal with intertextuality in the novel and more importantly with the explosive issue of whether or not the novel is racist. Finally, it gives major critical approaches to the novel.

### 15.1 INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain, it will be recalled, made his literary debut as a humorist, one among the many who flourished in the Civil War period. These humorists who are described as "literary comedians," "Phunny Phellows" and "Misspellers" were a rage in their time delighting Americans both with their writing and from the lecture platform. They evoked laughter by using grotesque exaggeration and by being irreverent towards men and traditional beliefs. More specifically, they used eccentric spellings, which was a kind of rebellion against traditional culture), puns, malapropism, anti-climax and burlesque and a quaint style.

Perhaps the tallest among these humorists was Charles Farrar Browne who following the fashion of the day appeared in print and in the platform under the non de plume of Artemus Ward. He was a friend of Mark Twain. Here is a sample of a "filler" he wrote for the editor of the newspaper *The Plain Dealer*.

The Plane Dealer:

Sir

I write to no how about the show bisnes in Cleveland I have a show consisting in part of a Calofny Bare two snakes lame foxies & also wax works . . . now mr. Editor scratch off few lines and tell me how is the show bisnes in your good city I shal have

handbills printed at your office you scratch my back I will scratch your back, also get up a grate blow in the paper about my show don't forget the wax works.

Yours truly

Artemus Ward

"People laugh," Ward explained, "more because of my eccentric sentences than on account of the subject matter." He went on: "There is no wit in the form of a well-rounded sentence. If I say Alexander the Great conquered the world and then sighed because he could not do it some more, there is a funny mixture." Among other things he ridiculed popular romances and burlesqued the lecturers--philosophers, politicians, ministers, professors--who dispensed wisdom and inspiration to people, outhumbugging "all the humbugs the world ever saw."

Artemus Ward was only one of the humorists--there were many more among whom there were three others who need to be mentioned: Henry Wheeler Shaw (non de Jume, 'Josh Billings'), David Ross Locke ('Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby') and Charles Henry Smith ('Bill Arp'). Through their play with words, their irreverence and exaggeration and burlesques and parodies, all these Phunny Phellows laughed at sentimentality and pretentiousness.

If he had affinity with Artemus Ward and other literary comedians Mark Twain also absorbed a great deal from the tradition of Southwestern humor modifying it in the process. In fact the comic tradition of the Southwest is, in the words of Bernard DeVoto, "the matrix of Mark Twain's humor." To come to specifics, four elements of Southwestern humor have been incorporated in *Huckleberry Finn*. They are: the comen (the king and the duke), the camp meeting, the circus and the Royal Nonesuch. Two debts could be mentioned here. The motif of the camp meeting in the novel (Chapter 20) has been traced to Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Suggs* (1845). Captain Suggs 'works' a camp meeting and makes a collection and disappears with it just as the king does a similar thing in *Huckleberry Finn*. Also, the hoax that Huck plays on Jim after the fog (in Chapter 15) is a version of the Western hoax perpetrated upon Pike in Dan De Quilles' *The Big Bonanza* (1877).

## 15.2 HUMOUR

Mark Twain's humour in *Huckleberry Finn* is clearly firmly rooted in the tradition of American humour. But it has appealed to readers across centuries and continents also, which shows its universality.

### Exercise

Now identify the devices Mark Twain has used in the novel for a similar purpose. Be specific, as far as you can by noting down chapter and page numbers.

"Most amiable and charming, Sir, you shake the sides of the world with meritment." That was what the Chancellor of Oxford University said while awarding Mark Twain his honorary degree. If this tribute is true of any one book of Mark Twain's, it is true of *Huckleberry Finn*.

It is an extremely funny book and its humour is unfading. What is the source or rather what are the sources of humour in it?

*Huckleberry Finn* is at once a book about boys and about adults, or more specifically about a boy's view of the world of adults. Does humour lie in the way the 14-year old

boy views things? Does it lie in the language used? Or in the situation in which the central character finds himself?

Another important area of enquiry is--is the book humorous in only one way? Or do we come across humour of different kinds in it? All this should lead on to answer the question: what is the quality of humour in this novel?

What is humour? Without waiting to define it at great length, we could say: Humour lies in oddity, in the perception of incongruity. This incongruity may be between the ideal and the real, between things as they seem and as they are, it may be between language modes, between the genteel and the vernacular. "The characteristic situation in American humorous writing," says Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "is that in which cultural and social pretensions are made to appear ridiculous and artificial" (380). This insight is particularly apt for *Huckleberry Finn* because a major preoccupation of the novel is exposure, exposure of sham and pretensions and artificiality in the anti-bellum society. And though there is much comedy of the purer sort, humour has primarily been used as a tool of attack, for ironic and amused comment and satire. Twain's is mostly a lambent flame that plays around the social institutions and practices without burning them. It sometimes scorches too but never reduces them to cinders.

For the sake of convenience the discussion has been arranged under humour arising out of character, situation and language.

### 15.2.1 Humour in Character

Huck:

Much of the humour in the book arises out of Mark Twain's choice of a 14-year-old narrator and the qualities he endows him with. The following points could be made. Some of these have been made earlier.

1.

Huck, we have already said, is an 'unreliable' narrator, which means that he does not always understand things completely. This disparity in understanding results in irony which leads to humour. Huck's naive response to the practice of saying grace shows that he does not understand its traditional importance. Consequently he is able to defamiliarize the practice even as he questions its intrinsic value. The same is true of his response to Widow Douglas' formula about praying. Again, the innocent questioning of Buck by Huck brings out the mindlessness of the killings in the feud. Much the same naive and criticism are evident in his description of the Grangerford parlour and his immature praise for Emmeline's poetry.

2.

Twain withholds a sense of humour from Huck. Consequently, like the dead pan expression of his creator on the lecture platform, Huck keeps a straight face almost never breaking into laughter. The only time he laughs is when he sees the king cawing on the stage all naked. Huck seldom loses his temper either. This lets the full humour of the situation to come through to the reader. The way Huck wriggles out of tight situations are all the more smart lies furnishes evidence of this. Such situations are all the more humorous because Huck is a vulnerable character who survives in the generally hostile world of adults on the strength of his wit. Besides, here we have the impishness of a child combined with his almost never failing invention.

3

Twain casts Huck in the mould of an ancient Greek comic type of character, Eiron, a character who deprecates himself, one who thinks he is worse than he thinks he is. This comes out very clearly in two episodes connected with Huck's dilemma on whether or not to help free Jim. In the first episode

(Chapter 16) he accuses himself of not being "a man enough" who hadn't "the spunk of a rabbit" to tell the slave hunters about Jim. His eventual decision shows Huck to be a true gentleman and friend but he thinks he is being weak and spineless. Later in chapter 31 Huck again acts splendidly when he decides to stand by Jim and go to "hell"--that is in fact his finest moment--but he believes he is being irremediably wicked. Twain modifies the mould because unlike an iron figure Huck does not merely pretend that he is worse than he is; he believes that he is a hopeless sinner. The result is laughter combined with admiration for him.

If Huck is an iron figure, the king and the duke are azaons, boastful characters, who are also accomplished comen. Both are figures of pure comedy. Each of them tells an extravagant tale to force Huck and Jim into treating them with deference due to their rank. The very rank that they usurp also enables Twain to attack hereditary nobility. He also uses them to comment on the gullibility and sentimentality of the people. This is clear in two episodes, one in which the king works a camp meeting and the other when the two attempt to cheat the Wilks' family. Here the king is taking up a collection for pirates:

So the king went through the crowd with his hat, swabbing his eyes, and blessing the people and praising them and thanking them for being so good to the poor pirates away off there; and every little while the prettiest of girls, with the tears running down their cheeks, would up and ask him would he let them kiss him, for to remember him by; and he always done it; and some of them he hugged and kissed as many as five or six times.

Though the king is a bit of a lecher, he is more interested in cash than in kissing. What Twain is doing here is to invite us to laugh at the misplaced sentimentality of the people. At times when their impostures become too blatant, Twain gives up irony and launches a direct satirical attack on the frauds. Their attempt to defraud the Wilks' children is a case in point. But Twain's satire is never allowed to remain harsh. For example here are three harsh things that Huck says about the king and the duke:

- i) It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race (Ch.24).
- ii) I never see anything so disgusting. (Ch.25)
- iii) . . . all that sot and slush it was just sickening. (Ch.25).

These hits are direct and severe but when Huck sees them cruelly tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail, his charity softens his earlier harshness:

Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them, poor pitiful rascals, . . . Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.

There is another example of direct satire in Col. Sherburn's speech to the mob after his murder of Buggs (Ch.22) in which Twain seems to be speaking for himself and which is rather harsh. Altogether, however, what we have in *Huckleberry Finn* is amiable or amusing satire.

### 15.2.2 Humour in Situation

Situational humour has been talked of in different contexts earlier.

It only needs to be said that there are scenes which are excellent examples for the study of humour in all its aspects--in character, situation and language. The king's speech at the Wilks' home is one such example and has been analysed earlier.

### 15.2.3 Humour in Language

- i) Huck's use of words like 'grumble' while referring to the practice of saying grace has already been referred to.

Tom however never learns. His evasion plan that means prolonged but needless torture and humiliation gives him "the best fun he ever had in his life and the most intellectual" (Ch.36). In saying this Tom defines what fun should not be.

What this book does very well, I think, is that it defines the limits of what constitutes fun or rather what does not constitute fun. For what is fun for Huck and Tom turns out to be torture and humiliation for Jim. Behind such insensitive fun seeking is the assumption that blacks aren't like whites and are easy game for white fun. Huck seeks fun with Jim twice but both times he fails. As part of his first attempt he ties a dead rattlesnake round Jim's bed but when Jim is bitten by a snake, he has a sense of guilt. But after the second attempt involving the fog incident he vows never to play mean tricks on Jim.

### 15.2.6 Defining the limits of Fun

Mark Twain is also using irony to criticize the white society for what Shelley Fisher Fishkin calls "the virtual enslavement of free blacks in the South during the 1880s" (97). The writer's use of burlesque to poke fun at Tom's make-believe world derived from conventional romance-writers in the first three chapters and the last ten chapters has been referred to earlier.

### 15.2.5 Burlesque

There are scenes of pure fun also such as Aunt Sally counting and miscounting the spoons and confusion caused by Tom and Huck's 'borrowing' of shirts and sheets for the evasion. It is delightful to see boys scoring over adults, which is entirely in tone with the youthful spirit of the book.

### 15.2.4 Farce

Ironically when Huck misuses the word mumps and then tries to explain it as something extremely serious to Susan and the hareip at the Wilks' home he ties himself up in knots. (28:219)

I say orgies, not because it's the common term, because it ain't--obsequies bein' the common term--but because orgies is the right term. . . . It's a word that's made up out'n in the Greek orgo, outside, open, abroad; and the Hebrew jesusum, to plan, cover up; hence inter. So you see, funeral orgies is an open er public funeral' (25:193-94).

The king's attempt to explain etymologically why he has used the word orgies for obsequies takes a dig at fake scholarship and is both audacious and vastly amusing.

The doctor says: 'Well take these fellows to the tavern and affront them with fother couple . . . .' (29:224).

Malapropisms never fail to amuse. Following the example of the literary comedians, Twain uses malapropisms, e.g. diseased for deceased (25, 193).

Another funny word he uses is 'leak' to refer to the tearshedding of the Frauds: "I never see two men leak the way they did" (25:189).

*Huckleberry Finn* has been one of the most controversial books in American literature. It was banned by the Concord Public Library soon after its publication in February 1885 because it was thought to "contain but little humour and that of a very coarse type," "the veriest trash," "more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." The wheel came full circle in 1957 when the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) condemned the book for its use of the vernacular term 'nigger' that was described as an affront to the dignity of a

## 15.4 IS HUCKLEBERRY FINN A RACIST BOOK?

Much of the humour of *Huckleberry Finn* depends upon the reader's awareness of the works of Shakespeare particularly *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and they will be able to savour Mark Twain's fully only if they have read the texts which are here mutilated and are able to see the incongruity between the original and the travesty of it.

These sources enumerated by Walter Blair are: Old Testament authors, Cellini, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Pepys, Defoe, LeSage, Saint-Simon, Casanova, Goldsmith, Scott, Moore, Trollope, Carlyle, Dumas, Dickens, Reade, Taine and W.E.H. Lecky.

Even so his reading which became wider especially after 1870s provided him "with much matter that he conquered and annexed to his territory." As for *Huckleberry Finn* "he trotted along in the track of funny American writers; he echoed more than a baker's dozen of them in this book alone," as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. put it. Besides there are echoes from foreign authors by the score--which is quite astonishing considering that the book's narrator is a semi-educated boy.

The assumption behind this concept is that texts are not isolated phenomena. They grow out of other texts and, as Jonathan Culler puts it, are made "possible by prior works which they take up, repeat, challenge, transform."

This is a term used to describe relationship between literary texts. This relationship is one of interdependence.

## 15.3 INTERTEXTUALITY

In what different ways is Twain critical of white society?

- its racism
- its violence
- its gullibility
- its sentimentality

Is the attack ironical? Or is it direct?  
Think of specific instances.

### Exercise

To sum, we have several kinds of humour in *Huckleberry Finn*. If there are moments of pure comedy, farce and impish humour of children, we also have humour as a tool of attack all buoyed up by the irrepressible zest of youth.

whole race. Since then the controversy has generated a considerable body of criticism centring round the characterization of Jim. Many black critics have objected to the way blacks have been depicted in the novel. Probably the most irreconcilable critic among them is Chicago educator Dr. John H. Wallace who has described it as "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written." But equally interestingly some of the best defences of the book also have come from black authors including Ralph Ellison and the Nobel Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison. And it has been called (by a white critic) "arguably the greatest anti-racist novel by an American" (Fishkin, 23). Meticulously the critical divide between the book's defenders and detractors is not entirely along colour lines.

Exercise

Before you proceed I would like you to examine your response to the novel on the question of racism. Focus particularly on the use of the word "nigger" and the presentation of Jim.

Let me suggest an analogy that would bring home to you the offensive nature of the word. What would your response be if an Indian writer used the derogatory word *bhangi* for a person who belongs to the lowest caste in the caste hierarchy?

Make notes about Twain's characterization of Jim so that you can argue that

- i) *Huckleberry Finn* is not a racist book
- ii) *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book

The charge of racism must be decided in terms of the total effect of the novel.

I would like to make the following points:

1. There are many voices in the novel--the voice of racism is one of them. But the speaker Pap Finn is far from being a sympathetic character--he is a drunkard, a violent criminal, a cruel father who is merely interested in getting hold of Huck's money. The speech is so self-condemnatory that Twain merely lets Huck report it without feeling the need to refute it.

2. Mark Twain's use of the offensive word 'nigger' has been objected to not only because it tarnishes a whole race but also because it encourages bigotry. However the usage has been defended on grounds of realism. In a 1991 interview, Ralph Ellison said: "Mark Twain was being quite realistic when he used the term. If I find it necessary, if I'm writing about characters who use that language, I put it down. That's the way it is. We have to learn to come to terms with it" (Fishkin, 197). Mark Twain had successfully transcended his own earlier racial bias and he was far in advance of his time. In fact he had the presence of a great writer to foresee how history would delay the fruits of freedom to the blacks and he put it in the ironic ending of the novel. Even so he apparently did not wish to create a psychological resistance in the minds of the contemporary readers by using a word other than the usual dialect word. We must also remember that Huck's use is entirely unselfconscious and he continues using it even after he has learnt to appreciate Jim's humanity. One can only conclude that Ellison's defence notwithstanding, Mark Twain was a creature of his times. But this does not mean that *Huckleberry Finn* is racist.

3. Mark Twain, it seems, used the available stereotype of a comic negro to start with. Initially Jim is ignorant, superstitious and gullible and an easy target for white jokes. But until his fraudulent sale by the king he is a growing, evolving character. In the course of his development Twain demolishes several myths of negro inferiority--that negroes are stupid, that they are

grown up children who need looking after and that they don't feel the bonds of family affection as strongly as the whites do. At his best Jim comes across as an adult, responsible, affectionate, protective and loyal, loyal to a fault. The novel shows that Jim may be illiterate and sometimes irrational but he is not stupid. He knows bird lore that saves Huck from the violent rain storm. In sharp contrast to his greedy sadistic father, Jim acts as a surrogate father. He warns Huck not to have anything to do with Walter Scott, an advice he disregards as a result of which both come perilously close to being trapped on the sinking boat. Jim builds a wigman which is a kind of home for both. He puts in extra hours of duty so that Huck could sleep longer. Lastly he nurses Tom who is his chief tormentor back to health, in complete disregard of his own interests. Twain obviously intends to raise him in our esteem.

Jim however shows unmistakable traces of his comic origin, in the beginning and particularly in the end when he is gleefully made to accept 40 dollars given by Tom for being such a patient prisoner.

... Jim was pleased/ most to death, and busted out, and says:

'Dah now, Huck, what I tell you? ...

I tole you I got a hairy breas', en what's de sign un it; en I tole you I ben rich wunst, en gwine to be rich agin; n it's come true; en heah she is! Dah, now! doan's talk to me - signs is signs, mine I tell you; en I knowed jis's well at I, uz gwine to be rich agin as I's a stannin heah dis minute!

(Chapter the last: 327)

The slideback into his earlier superstitious comic manner is shocking. But this as also Twain's use of the word 'nigger' in no way detract from the position that *Huckleberry Finn* is anti-racist both in structure and characterization. As Tom Morrison said, it was in fact to Mark Twain's credit that he insisted on bringing combustible issues which the Americans of 1880s were trying to bury, on the table. She believes that the cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim's captivity on into each generation of readers." A novel that deals with the explosive issue of racism and makes plentiful use of irony requires a sophisticated response. But we cannot blame the book for the fault of understanding of some of the readers.

## 15.5 MAJOR CRITICAL APPROACHES TO HUCKLEBERRY FINN

This section appropriately comes at the end of the Block. For the text of the novel is primary, and reading and re-reading it will pay rich rewards and lead to a deeper understanding of it. So keep coming back to the text and ruminate over it, and also keep comparing it with other texts wherever such comparisons are possible.

Theoretically it is quite possible for you not to read this section. But I hope you realize that our understanding of this text, any text, is a cumulative process. It is invariably based on the insights of other readers who came upon the novel earlier for what are critics but more efficient, better equipped readers?

Sometimes reading a good critical essay can set your own thoughts in motion and you may find yourself following the trail of an idea of your own.

The best thing you could do therefore is to be a sceptic like Huck - question accepted opinions.



"A classic is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read," said Clemens. But his own *Huckleberry Finn* is a classic with a difference. It is popular with both the general reader and the critic and is also controversial, with controversy dogging it from its first American publication in 1885. Initially found objectionable for its "trashy morality," it has now been denounced for its perceived racism. But the book continues to be read in classrooms and outside and to be subjected to close scrutiny not only by students, teachers and literary critics but by educators as well who are worried over its influence on young minds.

The popularity of the book at home and abroad is clear from the fact that as many as 145 American editions and 696 foreign editions of it in 53 languages and 47 countries came out during the period 1884 to 1976.

As for criticism, 3 books, over 600 articles and 8 anthologies of criticism came out during the same period. The centenary of *Huckleberry Finn* saw the publication of two anthologies of criticism entitled *Huck Finn Among the Critics* (1984) edited by M. Thomas Inge and *One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn* ed. by Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley. And there is a journal devoted exclusively to Mark Twain, *Mark Twain Journal* that contains articles on *Huckleberry Finn* among other works.

Indians too have contributed to the Twain scholarship with articles and more recently (1992) with an anthology of criticism on Twain edited by Prafulla Kar, which includes one Indian article on *Huckleberry Finn*. Another Indian contribution is entitled *Mark Twain and Nineteenth Century American Literature* (1993) edited by E. Nageswara Rao.

Clearly Walter Blair was right when he said in his preface to *Mark Twain and Huck Finn* (1960) that *Huckleberry Finn* was "unique in being held in the highest esteem by critics and at the same time prodigiously popular in the United States and throughout the world."

The criticism could be studied under two heads - Criticism during 1884-1950 and The Post-1950 Criticism.

### 15.5.1 Criticism during 1884-1950

This was a period of general assessment and later of historical studies.

In spite of the ban by the Concord Public Library *Huckleberry Finn* received good reviews and notices. Some fifty articles appeared during 1884-1920. The critics/reviewers focussed on "the general effect and effectiveness" of the novel and helped establish it as Mark Twain's masterpiece and as one of the masterpieces of the English language. Andrew Lang (1891), for instance, called it "the great American novel." The praise reached a particularly high pitch with H.L. Mencken (1913) who said it was "one of the great masterpieces of the world" and called Mark Twain the father of American literature, the first genuine American artist of the blood royal." In the next thirty years i.e. between 1921 and 1950 more than 80 essays appeared which were dominated by historical studies. Important areas of literary history that received attention were:

1. Influences like that of folklore, Western humour and Mark Twain's upbringing
2. sources of Huck; for the Grangerford piano and for the duke and his tooth-powder.

literary comparisons with *Don Quixote*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Horatio Alger* books.

The period was marked by a controversy that was sparked off by Van Wyche Brooks' (1920) argument who said that Mark Twain's artistic development had been arrested by his frontier upbringing and under the gentle influence of his mother, wife, and friend and mentor Howells. As a result he held *Huckleberry Finn* to be "of quite inferior quality." Bernard DeVoto (1932) disagreed saying that Mark Twain's frontier experience combined with his knowledge of common American life provided him with creative inspiration. DeVoto also deals with several elements in *Huckleberry Finn* - Mark Twain's use of the picaresque form, his brief but masterful characterization of Pap Finn and of the king and the duke, and the use of the vernacular.

With him [Huck Finn] goes a fullness made and shaped wholly of America. It is only because the world he passes through is real and only because it is American that his journey escapes into universal and is immortal. His book is American life formed into great fiction.

This entire period comes to a close with a landmark essay that the distinguished critic Lionel Trilling wrote by way of introduction for the Kinohart edition of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1949. This was followed by T.S. Eliot's introductory essay to another edition of the text in 1950. Apart from praising it both defended the ending of the novel. In doing so they sparked off a controversy in which almost every critic of American literature has taken part and which shows no sign of stopping even today. Besides, as John Gerber says, "Trilling anticipated the flood of New Criticism in the following years by discussing the book's language and structure ("in form and style *Huckleberry Finn* is an almost perfect work"), its symbolism (the river as god, Huck as its servant), and its psychological tensions (Huck vis-a-vis Jim). The essay has also given us a memorable phrase "a community of saints" Trilling used to describe the idyllic relationship between Huck and Jim on the raft.

The stage was set for close critical analysis and interpretation.

### 15.5.2 The Post-1950 Criticism

There has been a virtual explosion of criticism on *Huckleberry Finn* during this period and the interpretations have been as extensive as they have been diverse. No area—whether it be literary history, structure and the ending, characters, language, humour and latterly racism—has been left unexplored. For greater clarity important criticism has been grouped under major areas of interest in the novel.

#### Theme(s)

What is *Huckleberry Finn* about?

The question has evoked a bewildering variety of responses from its readers over the years. We can get some idea of this variety from the items listed below: alienation, conscience, death, faith in human goodness, freedom, initiation, loneliness, lying, morality, etc. Some critics express the theme in pairs of opposing words: appearance and reality, imagination and reality, freedom and slavery, individual and society and power and love. This list is based on John Gerber's article entitled *Introduction: The Continuing Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some of those who you might find worth paying attention to are the following: James Cox focuses on initiation of Huck accomplished through symbolic death and rebirth. For Leo Marx the purpose of the journey is quest for freedom. Also disagreeing with Trilling and Eliot's defence he finds that the ending is unsatisfactory because it detracts from the urgency and dignity with which the quest began. According to Richard P. Adams the theme is the growth of Huck's personality and his acceptance of adult responsibilities. Henry Nash Smith views the novel as a story of the conflict between self and society.

The structure of the novel, particularly the ending, has engaged the minds of a large number of critics. The criticism recognizes often explicitly, that *Huckleberry Finn* is picaresque and therefore episodic in nature, that its composition was interrupted, and that Mark Twain was not good at advanced planning.

Critics are ranged in two groups--there are those who are not satisfied with the structure and those who have defended it for its unity and coherence. The question of the ending is apparently an urgent and meaningful one for between 1950 and 1991 80 articles have defended it. The Norton Critical Edition has a section devoted to the problem of the ending.

The first to find the structure wanting was Thomas Sergeant Perry who in a review (1885) said that the ending was 'somewhat forced.' Hemingway who traced (1935) all modern American literature to *Huckleberry Finn* was more forthright--he asked the reader to stop where Jim is stolen. "That is the real end. The rest is cheating." Herman Wouk who considers *Huckleberry Finn* "the crown of our literature" thinks (1956) it to be a jerky, uneven, patchwork tale. He added that if one applied the classical standards of European fiction it was one long barbarous mistake. Leo Marx argues that though *Huckleberry Finn* is a masterpiece "the most serious motive in the novel, Jim's yearning for freedom, is made the subject of nonsense. The conclusion, in short, is farce. . . ." William Van O'Connor goes farther than most when he argues that "the critical acumen of Eliot and Trilling notwithstanding, there are a number of flaws in *Huckleberry Finn*, some of them attributable to Twain's refusal to respect the work of art and other attributable to his imperfect sense of tone." Contesting Howell's notion that he was "the Lincoln of our literature," he says that *Huckleberry Finn* is not the great American novel.

Among the first to defend the structure are Trilling and Eliot. In spite of detecting "a certain falling-off in the ending," Trilling finds "a formal aptness" in it. Eliot justified the ending saying that the mood of the book should rightly bring us back to that of the beginning and asked: "Or if this was not the right ending for the book, what ending would have been right?" Frank Baldanza (1955) argues more rigorously and persuasively that the book is knit together by an inner pattern of repetition and variation. Perhaps the most convincing defence of the structure comes from Richard Adams who says that instead of plot in the traditional sense, *Huckleberry Finn* has "a symbolic pattern or organisation of imagery" and that "the basic structure which exposes the theme of the boy's growth and which carries the weight of the incidents and the imagery throughout is a pattern of symbolic death and rebirth."

Some critics have divided the novel into suitable units to explain the structure. According to Professor Gladys Bellamy the book in spite of its episodic nature falls 'naturally' into three 'thematic units.' Martin Staples Shockey in a 1960 essay describes *Huckleberry Finn* as thematically coherent and structurally unified and proposes "a logical, ordered, five-part structure, with introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion."

Some of the views on the ending have already been referred to. Those who dislike the ending do so because Mark Twain's tone changes from satire to burlesque and from seriousness to farce and this abrupt change is accompanied by Tom's entry and his taking over and diminishment of the characters of Huck and Jim. But there has been a growing realization that the ending is deeply ironical. The defence of the ending by three black novelists could be mentioned. Ralph Ellison rejected Hemingway's view that the novel really ended with the stealing away of Jim and charged that he had missed completely the structural, symbolic and moral necessity "for the last part. It was that part that gave the novel its significance or else it would be "a boy's tale," "meaningless." More recently, Toni Morrison the Nobel Prize

Winner and author of *The Bluest Eye* felt that the last part of the book was Mark Twain's commentary on the "collapse of civil rights for blacks" in the 1880's. Even more recently the award-winning novelist David Bradley author of *The Changeling Incident* said that none of the critics of the ending had been able to suggest an alternative ending. "They all failed for the same reason that Twain wrote the ending as he did. American has never been able to write a better ending, America has never been able to write any ending at all" (Quoted in Fishkin, 202-03). Shelley Fisher Fishkin who uses views of the novelists referred to above to make a strong case for reading the ending as deeply ironic says: "*Huckleberry Finn* may end in farce, but it is not Twain's farce--it is ours" (Fishkin, 199).

### Huck and Jim

Critics have generally tended to romanticize Huck. He has been called a picaresque saint, a Prometheus, a frontier Thoreau, a Mississippi Moses, among other things. But there are dissenters like William Van O'Connor (1955), who believes that Huck's appeal is through an immature sort of innocence and that "if we refuse to overvalue him as a symbol, we may be less inclined to overvalue the novel . . ." (Inge, 382). Similarly Robert Keith Miller (1983) discounts the notion that *Huckleberry Finn* is "a novel of education" and believes that Twain never intended us to perceive Huck and Jim as "a community of saints" and that they are "attractive but imperfect" (Miller: 100).

Jim too has been presented as a larger-than-life figure. Roger Salomon relates both Huck and Jim "to the demigods of the river, to the barbarous primitives of the Negro", . . . James Cox is almost as eloquent. Describing him as "the conscience of the novel," Cox calls him the "great residue of primitive, fertile force" (Inge: 153).

On the other hand Ellison objected to the characterization of Jim because Twain fitted him into the stereotype mask of a minstrel show darky and "it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity--and Twain's complexity--emerge" (Norton: 421-22).

Daniel G. Hoffman argues that though Jim begins in the minstrel stereotype of a comic negro, Twain tries to make him come out of it "to stand before us in the dignity of his own manhood" (Norton: 435).

### 15.6 LET US SUM UP

We have come to the end of our journey of exploration.

*Huckleberry Finn* is a fascinating text to read and study. Far from being a classroom fossil that some classics come to be, it is alive, perhaps more alive than earlier. It is alive because it tries to deal with the contentious issues of racism and freedom and slavery. It is to this 'contestatory' quality of the book that Toni Morrison draws attention to in her brief but compelling discussion of it in the second of her William E. Masssey lectures delivered in 1990 (published as *Playing in the Dark*, Picador, 1993). The incorporation of this combative critique of slavery would, she believe, make *Huckleberry Finn* "another, fuller book."

*Huckleberry Finn* is a veritable kaleidoscope. It is extremely funny and its humour has not faded. When it makes satiric comments it does so with ironic naivete and does not pretend to judge. This non-judgemental quality is one reason among many of the enduring charms of the novel. It has a kind word even for the two rascals, the king and the duke, who do Huck and Jim most harm. What is even more fascinating is the troubled togetherness of Huck and Jim on the raft, each one incomplete without the other, each one needing the other to be truly free, and human and whole.

## 15.7 GLOSSARY

Humour and other issues

**New Criticism:** The name of a 'movement' in literary criticism which developed in 1920s. The New Critics advocated close reading and detailed textual analysis and tended to disregard the mind and personality of the writer.

**minstrel show:** a stage entertainment popular in America in the 19th century in which an actor impersonating as a negro burlesqued his character.

## 15.8 ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the use of humour as a tool of attack in *Huckleberry Finn*
2. List the points that you would use to argue that *Huckleberry Finn* (i) is a racist book, (ii) is not a racist book  
What are your personal feelings about the issue?  
In what way does your being an Indian affect your response to the book?
3. Can you relate *Huckleberry Finn* to any other novel/play you have read in your M.A. course or otherwise? Do you see any points of similarities/differences between this novel and Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*?
4. Attempt a character sketch of Jim and Huck.
5. To what extent would you regard *Huckleberry Finn* as an extended attack on the institution of slavery?

## 15.9 FURTHER READING

Clemens, Samuel Langhorne. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long and Thomas Cooley. Second ed. New York: Norton, 1977.

Contains besides the complete text with useful footnotes the following sections: Backgrounds and Sources and Criticism. Essays in the latter section are arranged under the following sub-heads: Early Views, Form and Symbol: The River and The Shore, The Problem of the Ending and Huck, Jim and Tom. The essays include those by Thomas Sergeant Perry, Brander Matthews, Van Wyck Brooks, Bernard DeVoto, Lionel Trilling, T.S. Eliot, Leo Marx, James M. Cox, Roy Harvey Pearce, Henry Nash Smith, Kenneth S. Lynn, Ralph Ellison, Daniel G. Hoffman, Walter Blair and Judith Fetterley. There is of course a select bibliography.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*. New Delhi: OUP, 1997.

Deals, among other things, with the issues of racism particularly in *Huckleberry Finn*. A must reading (available in the American Library, New Delhi.)

Hearn, Michael Patrick. *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Clarkson H. Potter, 1981. (Available in American Library, New Delhi.)

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Green Hills of Africa* 1935. New York: Scribner's, 1963. Briefly mentions Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn*

Hentoff, Nat. *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.

A novel about censorship set in motion when a school librarian refuses to take *Huckleberry Finn* out of circulation, defying her principal's order. The book is charged with being racist, sexist and immoral.

Inge, M. Thomas. *Huck Finn among the Critics: A Centennial Selection 1884-1984*. Washington: USIS, 1984.

Besides the introduction, contains two essays by way of background, early reviews by Brander Mathews and Thomas Sergeant Perry and other early responses by Andrew Lang, Sir Walter Besant, William Dean Howells and H.L. Mencken. The section on Modern Criticism includes essays by Lionel Trilling, T.S. Eliot, Leo Marx, James M. Cox, Frank Baldranza, Richard P. Adams, and Janet H. McKay. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on Film is part of the Appendix.

A major attraction of the volume is its annotated checklist of criticism on the novel from 1884 to 1983. (Available in the American Library, New Delhi.)

Kar, Prafulla C. *Mark Twain: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Delhi: Pencil International, 1992.

Contains three essays on *Huckleberry Finn*. Useful reading.

Kaul, A.N. "Mark Twain: *Huckleberry Finn*" in *History, Sociology and The American Romance*. New Delhi: Manohar, (in association with Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla), 1990, pp.28-30.

A lucid insightful discussion of the novel from the sociological point of view. Essential reading.

Miller, Robert Keith. "An American Odyssey: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*", in *Mark Twain*. New York: Frederick Ungar Pub Co. 1983.

Contains a somewhat irreverent reading the novel. Useful reading. (Available in American Library, New Delhi.)

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador, 1993, pp.54-57.

Contains a brief discussion on the "implications of the Africanist presence" at the centre of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Rubin Jr. Louis D. Ed. *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*. New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1973.

Contains four useful chapters: "Introduction: the Great American Joke" (p.3-15); "Mark Twain: The Height of Humor" (pp.139-147); "The Minstrel Mode" (p.149-56); "The Barber kept on Shaving": The Two Perspectives on American Humor" (pp.385-405). (Available in American Library, New Delhi.)

Sattelmeyer, Robert and J. Donald Crowley. Eds. *One Hundred years of Huckleberry Finn*. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1985.

Contains several useful essays including "Introduction: The Continuing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" by John C. Gerber (pp.1-12) and "We Ain't All Trying to Talk Alike: Varieties of Language in *Huckleberry Finn*" by David Sewall (pp.201-15) and others.

Essential reading (available in American Library, New Delhi).

Smith, Henry Nash. 'Mark Twain: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,' in *The American Novel From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner*. New York: Basic Books, 1965, pp.61-72.

Discusses the relevance of the book to the present times.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Jane Ogboon. Cambridge: CUP, 1995.

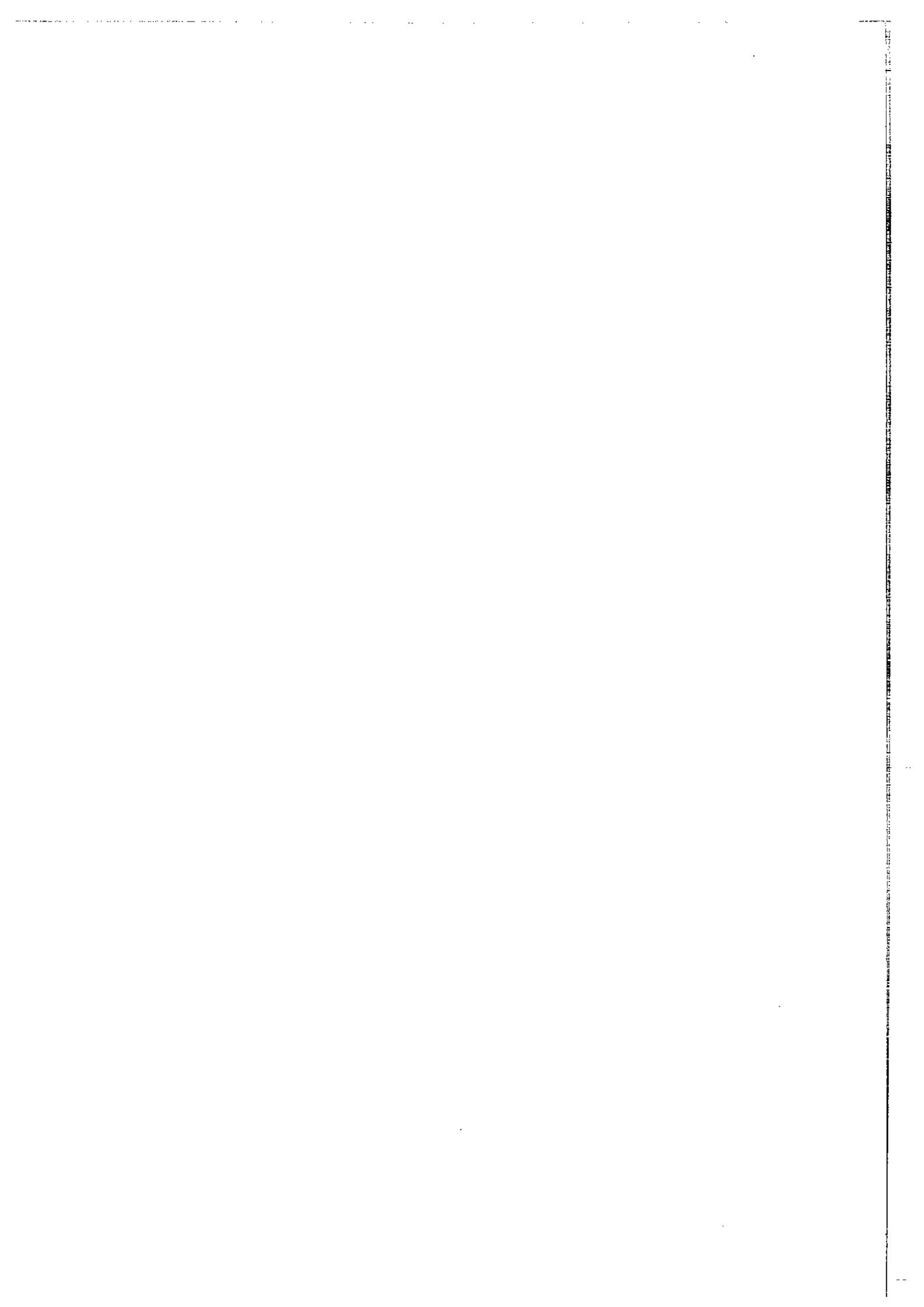
All references to the text in the Study Material are to this edition. This edition

contains several pages of Resource Notes besides a glossary.

The moral question involved in the kind of 'borrowing' described in Chapter 12 assumes serious dimensions in *Death of a Salesman* where it is related to the way

Willy has brought up his children.

Brander Matthews, "Mark Twain and the Art of Writing" in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain 1910-1980*, ed. Louis J. Budd (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1983), p.61.





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**AMERICAN PROSE**



Block

MAEN-05  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

## BLOCK INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN PROSE IN THE ERA OF NATION-FORMATION

Welcome to Block IV of this postgraduate course in American Literature. This Block will focus upon a study of American Prose in the Era of Nation-Formation, that is the historical period ranging approximately between America's War of Independence from British rule during the 1760s, sometimes also referred to as the American Revolution, and the onset of the Civil War during the 1860s between the Northern colonies and the Southern colonies which were to make up what we now know as the United States of America.

Those of you who have already gone through Block I of study material for this course—and I hope that most of you have been able to do so—would know that the latter half of the eighteenth century was a period of intense intellectual, political and social ferment in most of the English-speaking settlements of North America. Frequently referred to by scholars as the period of the American Enlightenment, the period marked the crucial transition of the English-speaking settlements from colonies of the British Empire to states of a sovereign, federal republic.

The transition was by no means easy. It engaged the hearts and minds of almost every would-be citizen of the emergent nation. Much of the writing of this period was concerned with the issues of national self-definition and national self-expression, necessarily arising out of the birth-pangs of a new nation. The question posed by St. Jean de Crevecoeur (refer to Block I, Unit 5.2), "What, then, is the American, this new man?" represented therefore the very spirit of that half-century.

The growing national self-awareness of the American people during this half-century was an inevitable offshoot of and reaction to increasingly repressive policies of the imperial government of Britain towards the colonials.

Though the British had ruled their colonies in America for almost 150 years, the small land-owning elite that actually made public policies for Britain (the masses had little to do with it) was in fact surprisingly ignorant of the colonies. The aristocracy did not emigrate, nor save in rare instances did it travel to the colonies to observe conditions for itself. The thirteen colonies were simply a kind of abstraction: a vaguely known and occasionally troublesome set of provinces on the edge of a far away continental wilderness so vast that the British mind could hardly conceive of it.

The colonies did not interest the British, apart from those who had investments there, or were personally involved in transatlantic trading. The English aristocracy shunned being "in trade." They thought simply of their own particular county, where they presided over their landed estates and tenant farmers; or of London, the "center of aristocratic existence," or of the European continent, to which for centuries the aristocracy had sent its sons to take the Grand Tour, and English armies to fight wars. There was certainly no great system of public media giving the aristocracy daily reports of world or colonial events. When a few items of colonial news appeared in London newspapers, they would be months old. When the government sent a query to one of its colonial governors about events there, it usually took months to get a reply.

The elite certainly did not know or want to know the colonial mind, any more than it cared to understand the other "outsiders" of British life. Yet, despite their profound ignorance of the colonials, the English aristocracy had distinct stereotypes in their minds as to what they believed the colonials were like. Put most simply, the English regarded the colonials as crude, distasteful, inferior people who did not seem to know their position. No matter how much of an aristocrat a colonial was at home, when in

England he was usually treated with amused contempt. He certainly could not be, in English aristocratic eyes, a *gentleman*.

After all, it would be said, consider the Americans' social origins. They were either moralistic, plain-thinking and plain-living Puritans and Quakers—Dissenters—who in English life were distinctly unfashionable and looked down upon; or they were self-made men like Benjamin Franklin, not men of established family or status; or they were slaveholders, and thus rather disgraceful people who whipped their "servants" and begot children upon their helpless black women slaves; or they were rude outlanders, like the Scot-Irish or Germans. Who could pay them any respect? In short, one of the convictions most firmly rooted in the English mind, as the historian John C. Miller has written,

... was the superiority of true-born Britons to the American colonists ... [They were] regarded as degenerate Englishmen or as the "scum or off-scouring of all nations"—"a hotchpotch medley of foreign, enthusiastic madmen"—a mongrel breed of Irish, Scotch, and Germans leavened with convicts and outcasts.

The English ruling classes, therefore, did not even try to understand the American mind when, around the middle of the eighteenth century, the Americans started to resist their domination through increased duties and taxes by English rulers. Rather than introspect on the rebellion, they regarded it as a challenge to their superiority and authority. The colonials, it was said over and over again, were "children" and the imperial government of Britain was the "parent." Worse yet, the Americans were ungrateful children. Had not Britain protected them again and again, at tremendous expense of properties and personnel, from their enemies the French? Was not their vast Atlantic trading fleet protected by the British navy? Their "insolent" challenge to England's rule (regarded as unlimited) could not be allowed. The colonials must in all circumstances learn to submit.

The colonials refused to oblige. In fact they advanced stirring arguments for not doing so, articulated through some of the most powerful prose written in the history of American literature. Unit 1 of this Block will outline the evolution of revolutionary prose in America during the years leading up to America's War of Independence.

Unit 2 will examine the prose written in the period of national consolidation stretching from the post-revolutionary decades to the years of Andrew Jackson's presidency (1828-1836) and a little beyond, covering the writings of the so-called Transcendentalist thinkers.

Jackson is often credited with the endeavour to establish a democratic consensus in American society, around which he then attempted to organise his agenda of agrarianism for America. But the democratic consensus represented by Jackson clearly excluded, if not, exploited, various categories of the marginalised populations of America—the Indians, the working-class whites and the Blacks. Unit 3 will discuss the prose writings of these marginalised groups.

Unit 4 will look at the prose emanating out of the breakdown of the Jacksonian consensus, limited as it was, in the years leading up to the American Civil War.

And, finally, Unit 5 will inspect an array of prose-writers thrown up over the quarter-century following the American Civil War—writers as diverse as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, who yet occupied common ground in trying to come to terms with the slow but sure erosion of the American Dream.

# UNIT 1 REVOLUTIONARY PROSE IN AMERICA

## Structure

1.0	Objectives
1.1	Introduction: The Context of Revolutionary Prose in America
1.2	The Evolution of Revolutionary Prose in America
1.3	Writing the Revolution—some key revolutionary texts
1.4	The Literature of Public Documents
1.5	Let Us Sum Up
1.6	Glossary
1.7	Questions
1.8	Suggested Readings

## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit will be to outline the evolution of revolutionary prose in America during the years leading up to America's War of Independence. This Unit will begin with the elaboration of the context of revolutionary prose in America, trace the contours of its rise and development and then analyse some key texts of the genre, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT OF

## REVOLUTIONARY PROSE IN AMERICA

American resistance to British domination of the English-speaking settlements of North America started actively in the early 1760s, ironically instigated by acts of omission and commission on the part of the British government itself. Initially, it tried to stop the westward movement of the colonials into the interior, for their migration produced burdensome Indian wars. Instead, the fur trade with the Indians was sought to be controlled directly from England through royal officials at centralised locations within the Indian territory west of the Appalachians. However, in 1763 the brilliant Indian leader Pontiac, angered at the autocratic and authoritarian way British officials exercised their power, set off a bloody war against the colonials in a desperate attempt to oust the British and with the return of the French. When he was finally defeated, chastened British officials established the Proclamation Line of 1763 along the crest of the Appalachians and decreed that the outraged colonials were not to go beyond it until a more effective Indian program was developed.

To tighten their regulation of imperial trade and raise within the colonies a revenue out of which the costs of their government could be borne, the British in 1764 passed the Sugar Act, the first law ever passed by Parliament specifically to raise money in the colonies. It placed new or higher duties on a wide range of imported products. Then came, in 1765, the fateful Stamp Act. It taxed all newspapers, pamphlets, licenses, commercial notes and bonds, advertisements, leases, legal papers, and other such documents.

This was clearly levying taxes without getting the consent first of those taxed. A raging controversy erupted in the colonies. The Sugar Act and the Stamp Act struck, as it happened, right at the most powerful and articulate groups in the colonies: merchants, businessmen, lawyers, journalists, and clergy. They, of course, defined the situation differently from the British. Taxation without consent! It was not to be borne. Liberty, freedom from oppression—that was the issue.

accelerated dramatically. the colonies, and not just in Britain. In the 1760s, this shift in consciousness the colonies were more and more interested in things going on at home, throughout (names and concepts) in the colonial newspapers from the 1730s and 1740s. In short, heightened self-consciousness of the colonies showed up in the use of symbols made an exciting discovery: that they were a *different* people from the English. The Indeed, through the course of the patriot movement in the colonies, the colonists learnt not to accept their erstwhile self-image of being extensions of the British. For another thing, the colonies had got charged by their exercises in defiance and

clever enough in its tactics and firm enough in its resolve. colonies were dependent like children who could be made to obey, if London was just colonies was fatally wrong. Before long they would once more begin acting as if the problem: that the picture they carried in their minds of their relationship with the really learnt anything fundamental. Essentially, they were still unaware they had a that seemed to build inevitably from crisis to crisis. For one thing, the British had not However, these spectacular events were just the opening acts of a transatlantic drama

loyalty to the empire. The troubles seemed ended. inflammatory Declaration, expressing their feelings in an outburst of oratorical The colonials concentrated upon the fact of repeal and ignored the potentially Act, which stated that in any event Parliament was completely sovereign over them. In March 1766 Parliament angrily accepted the inevitable and repealed the Stamp

of the rebellious colonies was forged. vulnerable of the colonies encouraged the others to follow suit. Soon a united front Parliament that sought to tax them. This bold stand by the largest and most of this Colony [who were] not bound to yield obedience to any law coming from had "the only and sole exclusive right and power to lay taxes . . . upon the inhabitants therefore void. On May 30, 1765, Virginia's House of Burgesses had resolved that it unconstitutional—i.e., it was beyond the brief possessed by Parliament—and London. They were adamant that the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act were The colonials were no longer in a mood to be thus haughtily put in their place by

One result of the attempt to enforce the tea tax



As the argument between the colonials and the British raged on, the thirteen colonies, which formerly had little to do with each other, awakened to a crucial new fact in their lives: *They shared a common enemy*. Unconsciously and involuntarily, *this gave them a sense of common identity and a common purpose*.

But what would this "new people" on the coast of North America call themselves? Formerly, they had referred to themselves as "British." During the years of mounting tensions, however, this practice became unpopular. There was, in fact, an alternative. For a hundred years colonials occasionally had referred to themselves as living in what they called "America" or "these American parts." In the 1730s and 1740s, as the thirteen colonies swelled in population and self-awareness, the name popped up more frequently, as in publications like *The American Magazine* (founded in 1741).

For some time, as it happened, the British in the mother country had not been able to call the colonials "British." So they too needed a collective name to refer to this diverse, irritating and aggressive crowd of people who first began referring with considerable frequency to the colonials simply as "Americans," a name which for them seemed to carry a note of disdain and disgust. Then in the 1760s an intriguing thing happened. The colonials, eager to distinguish themselves from the British, seized upon what to the mother country was a derogatory name and began using it with mounting pride. Everywhere it appeared in the newspapers, in social and political discourse, in scholarly journals, and, last but not the least, in literature, as in Philip Freneau's widely praised 1771 production, *A Poem on the Rising Glory of America*. So it was that the "Americans" got their lasting name, product of a sudden realisation on both sides of the Atlantic, during a great and historic argument, that a new people whose separate existence had not formerly been recognised had come into being on the North American continent.

## 1.2 THE EVOLUTION OF REVOLUTIONARY PROSE IN AMERICA

It was under the circumstances indicated above that American-revolutionary prose developed and evolved.

The historian David Ramsay has, as a matter of fact, accorded utter centrality to American revolutionary prose in recounting the saga of the American Revolution. "In establishing American independence," he observes in *The History of the American Revolution* (1789), "the pen and the press had merit equal to that of the sword." Ramsay's statement has at least two connotations. One, that the writings about historical events themselves, the writings about the American Revolution being no exception to this rule. Two, that writings inspire events, even as Americans started to express their revolution much before they enacted it. As Robert A. Ferguson has remarked,

Writing the thought inscribes the conception, which, in time, blurs the line of distinction between thought and act. Somewhere, a legitimate rhetoric of opposition grows into the outrageous possibility of revolution.

A paradigmatic text in this context is Jeremiah Dummer's *A Defence of the New England Charters* (1721). Dummer, British agent for Massachusetts and Connecticut and an American lawyer in London, rejects all thought of colonial revolt as "judicious" in his "short digression" on the subject, and yet the rebel leader John Adams could properly call this pamphlet the handbook of the Revolution. As Adams told William Tudor in 1818 "The feelings, the manners and principles which

produced the Revolution, appear in as vast abundance in this work as in any that I have read.

American Prose

How can we reconcile Dummer's and Adam's antithetical views about *A Defence of the New England charters*? Dummer raises the idea of revolution only to dismiss it: "it would not be more absurd to place two of his Majesty's Beef-Eaters to watch an Infant in this Cradle, that it don't rise and cut its Father's throat, than to guard these weak Infant Colonies, to prevent their shaking off the British Yoke." Nevertheless the double languages of the American and the Britisher, of the subject-citizen who is indecisive about his loyalties, do render the absurd intelligible. In *A Defence of the New England Charters*, Dummer worries repeatedly about the "arbitrary" power of the Crown, the "unnatural insult" to colonial rights, and the "oppression" of royal governors, even as he laughs away any possibility of insurrection. The dangers he cites are indeed a cause for dismay. "Oppression rushes in like a tide, and bears down everything before it." To the extent that British rule appears as a burden, metaphors belie their surface meanings. An infant cannot commit parricide, but, later and often enough, children do revolt against their parents" (Robert A. Ferguson).

Here in the interstices of repudiation and anticipation, is the voice of the Revolution, one that is half-British, half-American, and, in its stuttering progressions, often less than aware of itself as a revolutionary discourse. In fact, the stutter in early revolutionary writings is the most significant literary characteristic of those writings: overcoming it, the first indication of revolutionary success.



Benjamin Franklin



America's Renaissance man, Jefferson was a brilliant political philosopher, architect, naturalist, agriculturalist, and political leader. He dreamed of a western "empire for liberty" for America and secured the Louisiana Purchase

We need to understand this process better. A great deal has been made of the facility of colonial revolutionary writers in the 1760s and 1770s and of the convenient availability to them of an English oppositional rhetoric. Disgruntled Americans like John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson prove a literary match for the best intellects of the era in London, and their ability is one of the first things noticed by contemporary British readers. Even the most die-hard British interpreter

could identify influences and analogies in arguments advanced by the colonials: the tyranny of subjugation, the democratic rights of any people or nation, the dangers of corruption in the constitution and the emphasis upon public virtue.

But these influences and analogies in themselves stress the enthusiasms rather than the hesitations in protest, and it is the hesitations that define the evolution of colonial protest. Until 1776, the dominant Anglo-American perspective remains against the thought of rupture between America and England.

### 1.3 WRITING THE REVOLUTION—SOME KEY REVOLUTIONARY TEXTS

If one document can explain the several hundred American pamphlets on the crisis of politics in the emergent nation between 1764 and 1776, it would be John Adam's *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765). Adam commences with the assumption, taken from Bishop John Tillotson, that ignorance is the greatest cause of human misery, and concludes with the assertion that "every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a flowing." In between occurs a controlling discovery: only the propagation and proliferation of knowledge among the people can preserve liberty. *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* uses this structure to draw out a contrast between Adam's delineation of European ignorance and the American Enlightenment. In Europe, a nexus between the clerical and feudal powers had kept the masses in the dark about their rights until the Reformation, which incited the struggle for knowledge. The first Americans (white Americans of course), establish their settlements in direct opposition to the feudal and clerical systems, substituting "the Bible and common sense" for "the ridiculous fancies of sanctified effluvia from episcopal fingers." Inevitably, the Stamp Act of 1765 figures as "the first step" in a European conspiracy to take America back into the dark ages.

Adam's agenda is to seek the broadest possible popular publicity to this conspiracy, "to enslave all America" as well as to warn all Americans that "liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people". Adam himself therefore fulfils a patriotic function in publishing his pamphlet in the *Boston Gazette*. He is participating in the self-proclaimed prescription that informed citizens should communicate their thoughts in writing to the general public.

Put in his own words, Adam's aim appropriates every major pamphlet of the period:

Let them all become attentive to the grounds and principles of government, ecclesiastical and civil. Let us study the law of nature, search into the spirit of the British constitution; read the histories of ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome: set before us the conduct of our own British ancestors, who have defended for us the inherent rights of human kind against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers, against arbitrary kings and cruel priests, in short, against the gates of earth and hell.

It is as if these words become every writer's guide. Pamphlet after pamphlet purposefully fuses the principles of government, the meaning of the British Constitution, the history of classical, English and American politics and the law of nature in an interpretation of the crisis at hand. Most, as well, distinguish between civil and ecclesiastical frames of reference even as they conflate religious and secular rhetoric in a political writing. Thus the methodology remains much the same, although individual investigations might arrive at different conclusions. Meanwhile, to quote Robert A. Ferguson again, "the tedium of repetition serves yet another purpose; the rhythms in pamphletting gradually smoothen the irregularities in revolutionary thought."



The American pamphleteer who reaches the largest audience in the world of the late 1760s is John Dickinson in *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. Only Thomas Paine in the next decade would have a more electric impact on colonial thought. Dickinson's twelve epistolary essays to "My dear Countrymen" originally appeared in *The Pennsylvania Chronicle*. Other colonial newspapers re-issued the essays as they were printed in *The Chronicle* between December 1767 and February 1768. Collected in a single pamphlet immediately after the last letter, they quickly went through seven editions in the colonies and several in England. The most intensive and extensive pamphlet publication by any person during that period, its relevance to contemporaries is ensured by its strategic appropriation of the cultural imperatives of its own time and place. Intellectually, Dickinson uses the most sophisticated argumentation to establish that Parliament cannot tax the colonies. His education at the London Inns of Court shows in the Pennsylvania Farmer's frequent citation of British law and of writers such as Tacitus, Machiavelli, Locke and Hume. These sources encourage him to assume that the social compact protects the inalienable right of property; thus any attempt to tax the property of an unrepresented citizen is contrary to English law. Emotionally, Dickinson is adept at the transition, this intellectual assumption translates into the celebrated cry of Letter VII: "*We are taxed without our own consent, expressed by ourselves or our representatives. We are therefore—SLAVES.*" And yet Dickinson never sacrifices his British readership to such rhetoric. With amazing dexterity in his prose, he manages to keep all his different constituents under his spell.

The Pennsylvania Farmer always imposes substantial and structural limitations on political opposition. He considers the Townshend Acts of 1767 (externally imposed duties on American imports of glass, paper, paint, and tea) to be as unconstitutional and undemocratic as the Stamp Act before them, and he challenges these laws across the scale of resistance from legal petition, to strikes, to armed insurrection. Invariably, though, as Robert Ferguson has shown through an excellent textual analysis of the *Letters*, the idiom of *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* seals off the last alternative of a revolt through weapons. Letter I detests "inflammatory measures" ("I should be sorry that anything should be done which might justly displease our sovereign, or our mother country"). Letter III terms liberty "a cause of too much dignity to be sullied by turbulence and tumult"; the colonials must be "dutiful children, who have received unmerited blows from a beloved parent." "We cannot," warns the Farmer, "act with too much caution in our disputes." Letter IX inveighs against popular violence and rage; Letter XI against popular reform; and Letter XII against the unscrupulousness of "ill-formed zeal."

The right kind of restraint is achieved through a strategy of brakes and controls. Dickinson begins by asking for "a firm, modest exertion of a free spirit," but the checks imposed thereon are quite complex. "Letter II" balances protest over the Townshend Acts ("dreadful stroke aimed at the liberty of these colonies"), against a modesty of temperament ("I have waited some time, in expectation of seeing the subject treated by persons much better qualified for the task"), and the freedom of the writer's essential theme ("so should not any honest man suppress his sentiments concerning freedom") against the obligation of the writer to express himself or herself with responsibility. If the Farmer seems to give with one hand while taking with the other, it is because he sees that the living whole, "a free spirit," cannot be simplified—especially in America.

The problem of definition of the American identity is taken up pointedly in "Letter III." Dickinson explains the difficulty of the project in terms of its complexity: "It will be impossible to determine whether an American's character is most distinguishable for his loyalty to his sovereign, his duty to his mother country, his love of freedom, or his affection for his native soil." Each of these elements must be maintained, in theory as well as in practice. Dickinson struggles harder than any other colonial intellectual to keep these conflicting affinities aloft even when they confront each other.

But the balance is difficult to sustain as matters reach a head by the middle of the 1770s in the ongoing opposition between the interests of the "native soil" and the interests of the "mother country," to put the issue in the terms employed by John Dickinson. As physical confrontation becomes more and more likely in 1774 and 1775, Americans are forced to respond more directly to divisions within themselves. Community mobilisation is forcing Loyalists into silence or flight, and colonial solidarity, always a preference, now emerges as the emphatic priority in revolutionary prose.

One pamphlet which forcefully depicts the new situation is Thomas Jefferson's *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774). *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* takes the almost unprecedented step of making the king of England a primary adversary. The step is also irrevocable, and its importance at this moment in 1774 is paramount. As long as Parliament remains the main target of colonial protest, Americans can qualify their opposition to English colonisation in the name of loyalty to king and kingdom. Jefferson, in selecting George III as his real opponent in *A Summary View*, sacrifices that safer instance; loyalty is suddenly conditional. "But can his Majesty thus put down all under his feet?" he asks. It is an anticipated question, but Jefferson now offers an unanticipated answer with a frontal attack on the crown: "Let him remember that force cannot give right." When he adds that "it is neither our wish nor our interest to separate from [Great Britain]," he is also admitting the negative possibility. "This, Sir," Jefferson concludes on the necessity of liberty, "is our last, our determined resolution." His words add the insult of personal rebuke to the injury of impersonal revolt.

The temerity evident in Jefferson's formulation was soon to secure his place as the drafter of the Declaration of Independence, where again the king figures as the essential foe. The indictment of the king himself solves some of the frustrating difficulties encountered by colonial writers, before 1774, in making Parliament the main target of their protest. For Parliament is not only multifaceted and multi-voiced and, therefore, hard to pin down, it also symbolises institutional liberty in an eighteenth century understanding of Anglo-American culture. Jefferson, for his part, does not absolve Parliament, but he also extends his critique to cover "the most precarious of all tenures, his Majesty's will."

The interesting alignment of the colonies against their monarch also figures graphically in the rhetoric of New World politics. *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* converts mundane historical fact into exotic meta-historical fantasy. The truism that no European king has ever stood on western shores becomes in Jefferson's representation, a matter of deliberate endeavour on the part of emigrating peoples. A paradigmatic revolution is in the making, the basis of which is the sense that monarchy itself is a "violation" of the "purity" of America. Jefferson's argument is fourfold: that all peoples have a natural right of emigration; that the first Americans, as an emigrating people, voluntarily chose to remain under the laws of England ("the emigrants thought proper to adopt that system of laws, under which they had hitherto lived in the mother country"); that the nature of this choice creates separate legal systems linked only by a common executive, the king of England; and this king "is no more than the chief official of the people, appointed by the laws and circumscribed with definite powers, to assist in working the great machine of government."

The chequered career of *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* is indicative of the complex purpose of Jefferson's text. *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* evolved as a "Draft of Instructions to the Virginia Delegates in the [First] Continental Congress." When the Convention rejects this draft, Jefferson's colleagues in Williamsburg publish and distribute it under its present title, and other publishers soon reprint it in both America and England. As such, it appears to read sometimes as an official document, sometimes as a letter to the king, and sometimes

as a political pamphlet. Jefferson and his comrades-in-arms selectively employ all three forms to drive their compatriots towards rebellion.

Rebellion, outright, is the message of *Common Sense* (1776). Even the ambiguities and ambivalences of address in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, relatively inconspicuous though these are, are absent in Thomas Paine's tract. Thomas Paine's tract makes the pioneering open argument for independence, in a language accessible to any literate person. "Society in every state is a blessing, but Government even in its best state is but a necessary evil . . ."

Society in every state is a blessing,  
but government, even in its best state,  
is but a necessary evil; in its worst state,  
an intolerable one.  
-Thomas Paine,  
*in Common Sense*



Portrait of Thomas Paine executed by John Wesley Jarvis (1781-1839) and now on exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Paine negates the theory of the divine right of kings through a satirical history of the British monarchy, beginning with the Norman conquest of 1066 when William the Conqueror crossed over from France to England and established sovereignty there. "A French bastard landing with an armed Banditti and establishing himself King of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it."

Paine analyses in economic terms, the pros and cons of American allegiance to England.

I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge: not a single advantage is derived. Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for by them where we will . . .

In his opinion, the "disadvantages which we sustain by that connection are without number . . . and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship."

He built slowly to an emotional pitch: Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART.

Among the rash of pamphlets, which appear in America between 1764 and 1776 debating the relationship with England, *Common Sense* is undoubtedly the pre-

eminent, going through twenty-five editions in 1776 and selling hundreds of thousands of copies.

Revolutionary Prose  
in America

Paine's pamphlet appeals to a wide range of American opinion angered by England. He himself is from "the lower orders" of England—a relatively poor immigrant to America. He arrives in Philadelphia, when resentment against England is already strong in the colonies. The artisan mechanics of Philadelphia, along with journeymen, apprentices, and labourers, were forming into an association of the politically aroused underclass, "in general damned riff-raff, dirty, mutinous and disaffected" as local aristocrats described them. By speaking plainly and powerfully Paine articulates the woes of these people (he opposed property qualifications for voting in Pennsylvania). But his primary constituency seems to have been a middle group. "There is an extent of riches as well as an extreme of poverty, which, by narrowing the circle of man's acquaintance, lessens his opportunities of general knowledge."

Once the Revolution is in progress, Paine explicitly cautions against mass action of lower-class people, like those militia who in 1779 attacked the house of James Wilson. Wilson was a leader of the Revolution who was absolutely against a subaltern empowerment through the Revolution. Paine becomes an associate of one of the wealthiest men in Pennsylvania, Robert Morris, and a supporter of Morris' creation, the Bank of America.

During the process of the adoption of a Constitution for the United States, Paine, insensible of his own class bias, argues in favour of a strong central government which, according to him, could represent some great common interest. In this sense, as the historian Howard Zinn has observed, Paine lends himself perfectly to the myth of the American Revolution—that it was an enterprise of all Americans against the British State.

## 1.4 THE LITERATURE OF PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

The Declaration of Independence, adopted on July 2 and proclaimed on July 4, 1776, by the Continental Congress, an illegal body and forerunner of a future independent American government, brings the myth of a united America to its peak of eloquence. Each harsher measure of British tyranny—the Proclamation of 1763 not allowing colonialists to settle beyond the Appalachians, the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act and the Declaratory Act—escalates colonial rebellion to the point of revolution. It is after the armed clash at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, between colonial insurgents and British militia, that the Continental Congress eventually takes the decision for a clean break. They entrust a special committee to compose the Declaration of Independence, which Thomas Jefferson writes.

By 1776, there is an all-pervasive sentiment for independence. Resolutions adopted in colonies as far apart from one another as North Carolina and Massachusetts urge the Continental Congress to declare independence of England, assert that all British law is null and void and demand military action against English authority.

"When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands . . . they should declare the causes . . ." This is the opening of the Declaration of Independence. Then, in its second paragraph, comes the powerful philosophical statement:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted

among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.

It then goes on to list specific charges against the king, "a history of repeated injuries and usurpation, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." The list accuses the king of England of dissolving colonial governments, waging war against them, "transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny," sending armies of occupation, cutting off colonial trade with other parts of the world, taxing the colonials without their consent and "sending swarms of officers to harass our people."

All this, the language of popular control over governments, the right of rebellion and revolution, anger against tyrannical administration, is language appropriate to unite thousands of colonials, making them forget their individual and sectional grievances to fight against England.

Some Americans clearly remain outside the pale of the unity talked about in the Declaration of Independence: Indians, women of every ethnicity, black slaves. Indeed one paragraph of the Declaration charges the king with inciting slave rebellions and Indian attacks:

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

Thomas Jefferson (though himself a slave-owner) had written a paragraph of the Declaration accusing the king of transporting slaves from Africa to the colonies and "suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce." Whatever the motivation for this accusation—it is sometimes interpreted as an expression of colonial fear of being swamped by the growing number of black slaves—Jefferson's allegation was removed by the continental congress, because slave-holders themselves disagreed about the desirability of ending the slave trade.

As for the Indians, Jefferson does not even pretend to be concerned about them, they are so far removed from the circumstances of civilization. Twenty years before the Declaration, a proclamation of the legislature of Massachusetts, dated November 3, 1755, declares the Pentecost Indians "rebels, enemies and traitors" and provides a bounty: "For every scalp of a male Indian brought in . . . forty pounds. For every scalp of such female Indian or male Indian under the age of twelve years that shall be killed . . . twelve pounds . . ."

When the Declaration affirms that "all men are created equal," it probably does not intend to make a discriminatory insinuation against women. It is just that women are never regarded as worthy of mention. They are politically invisible. Though practically speaking, women might wield certain authority within the home, on the farm and in select professions such as midwifery, they are simply overlooked in any consideration of political rights or prerogatives.

The philosophy of the Declaration, that government is set up by the people to secure their life, liberty and happiness, and is to be overthrown when it no longer does that, is couched as a universalist narrative, applicable to all people at all places and at all times. But in point of fact it was limited only to the context of white males of America.

Yet, were all white males encompassed by the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence? These principles are often traced to the ideas of John Locke in his *Second Treatise on Government*. That was published in England in 1689, when the English were rebelling against a tyrannical monarchy and setting up a democratic parliament. The Declaration, like Locke's *Second Treatise*, talks about political equality in terms of the need to establish representative government, but ignores growing inequalities in property. And how can people possibly have equal rights with stark differences of wealth and hierarchies of social class?

In the America of the era of the Declaration of Independence, not even all white males had equal rights. The egalitarian language of the Declaration notwithstanding, *Wealth of Nation* ignores the reality of inequities of American society (even white male American society), since emphasizing these might unduly disturb the national identity that it intended to forge through its inspirational idiom.

The obliteration of Indians, the subordination of blacks and the occlusion of women in the independent American states, already prepared for in the colonies in the run-up to the Revolution, can now be put on paper, solidified and solemnised by the Constitution of the United States, drafted at a convention of revolutionary leaders in Philadelphia.

To many Americans down the ages, the Constitution outlined in 1787 has seemed essentially a liberal and democratic manifesto aspiring to inform a social framework of equality and fraternity. This view is stated, exaggeratedly, by the historian George Bancroft, writing in the early nineteenth century:

The Constitution establishes nothing that interferes with equality and individuality. It knows nothing of differences of descent, or opinions, of favoured classes, or legalised religion, or the political power of property. It leaves the individual alongside of the individual. As the sea is made up of drops, American society is composed of separate, free, and constantly moving atoms, ever in reciprocal action . . . so that the institutions and laws of the country rise out of the masses of individual thought which, like the waters of the ocean, are rolling evermore.

A contrary view of the Constitution is articulated early in the twentieth century by the historian Charles Beard (and aroused annoyance, including a antipathetic editorial in the *New York Times*). He writes in his book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*:

In as much as the primary object of a government, beyond the mere repression of physical violence, is the making of the rules which determine the property relations of members of society, the dominant classes whose rights are thus to be determined must perforce obtain from the government such rules as are consonant with the larger interests necessary to the continuance of their economic processes, or they must themselves control the organs of government.

In short, according to Beard, the dominant classes must, in their own interest, either control the government or control the laws by which government operates.

Beard applies this general idea to the Constitution, by studying the class backgrounds of the fifty-five men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to draw up the Constitution. He finds that a majority of them are men of wealth, in land, slaves, manufacturing or trade, that half of them have money loaned out at interest, and that forty of the fifty-five hold government bonds, according to the records of the Treasury Department.

Thus, Beard finds that most of the makers of the Constitution have some immediate economic interest in establishing a strong federal government: the land speculators want protection as they invade Indian lands; slave-owners need federal security against slave revolts, the manufacturers need protective tariffs, the traders want to stop the use of paper money to pay off debts, bondholders want a government able to raise money by nationwide taxation to pay off their bonds.

Four groups, Beard notes, are not represented in the Constitutional Convention: slaves, indentured servants, women, men without property. Even Beard does not notice the elimination of Indians. And so the Constitution, drawn up in 1787, does not reflect the interest of these groups.

Beard makes it clear that he does not think the Constitution is written merely to benefit the Founding Fathers of the Constitution personally, although it is difficult to ignore the fact that most of them belonged to the rich and the powerful sections of society. The Constitution, therefore, according to Beard, represents the "economic interests [the Founding Fathers] understood and felt in concrete, definite form through their own personal experience."

### 1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have looked at the evolution of revolutionary prose in America during the years leading up to America's War of Independence. The Unit begins with the elaboration of the context of revolutionary prose in America, traces the contours of its rise and development and then analyses some key texts of the genre, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, with all their ideological and political biases.

### 1.6 GLOSSARY

**Gentleman:**

A propertied person, who on the strength of his property (in terms of land) enjoyed social eminence and cultural significance in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century United States.

**Puritan:**

Among the earliest European settlers on the American continent, the Puritans who started arriving at its eastern coast from the 1620s onwards were mostly Englishmen and Englishwomen who has dissociated themselves from the ruling Church in England, the Anglican Church. Their disenchantment with the Anglican Church (a by-product of the Protestant Movement against the deviations and distortions of 'pure' Christianity which Roman Catholicism was seen to be engaged in) stemmed from their perception that the Anglicans had not gone far enough in correcting Roman Catholic heresies.

Of course many of the Protestant Movement goals had been won after Reformation within the Church of England. The Church of England was now under the English king, not under the Pope in Rome, the Bible had been put into the English language so that ordinary people could read it; and priests no longer

stood in effect between the worshipper and God. Priests did not dispense forgiveness for sins, that being now a matter between the individual sinner and God, nor did they perform the miracle of turning bread and wine into the body of blood of Christ. The Church of England held that no such transformation took place: that if a miracle took place in the Eucharist (communion service), it took place not on the altar but in the soul of the communicant.

Puritans believed, however, that far more needed to be done. The Bible, they insisted, should be made the center of every thing, for its was the word of God. Religious ritual should be simple and brief, and the whole setting inside church buildings should be physically plain and unadorned so as not to get people worshipping material objects. They would all shift their attention to the sermon, in which the word of God as found in the Bible would be carefully explained by an educated minister.

The Puritan enthusiasm for further reform, however, was not received kindly by the Anglican establishment. The Anglican establishment and represented the Puritan enthusiasm as fanaticist and fundamentalist which indeed, to a certain extent, it was.

This, and a consequent persecution from the religious authorities in most countries of Europe, prompted some the most devout of the Puritans to migrate to "New England". Here at last they would fulfill their covenant with God: They would create a Godly Commonwealth, and He would give them His blessing. The Bible, expounded by the ministers, would be the rule in all aspects of daily living. Indeed, in 1635, within fifteen years of their arrival in New England, the Puritans were so zealous that they decided only the "saved" could be church members (in England it took an honest life, a profession of faith, and an acceptance of church discipline to be a member). This made the Bible Commonwealth even more pious and homogeneous, for only Church members (born again Puritans) could vote in its elections.

## Quaker:

The Quakers, like the Puritans, were a set of believing Christians. They too were passionately religious, they too dreamed of creating a dramatically new way of living, an utopia based in a dramatically new religious faith. Quakers, however, held theological views quite opposite to those of the Puritans. Why? Because they thought that humanity was basically good, not evil.

Quakers believed in something that horrified everyone else—that we may become perfect in this life. After all, they would say, God is in everyone of us (not simply in the Puritan "elect"). If there is evil in this world, it lies in external institutions of power.



- Robert Kelley. *The Shaping of the American Mind*. 1975.
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## 1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Elaborate upon the context which made the production of revolutionary prose possible in the English-speaking settlements of North America during the middle decades of the eighteenth century.
2. Comment upon the shifts in substance and in structure within the tradition of the revolutionary pamphlet in America from *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765) to *Common Sense* (1776).
3. Through a close textual reading of relevant portions of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, show how these two documents seek to represent the establishment of the American republic as a consensual project covering all segments of society in revolutionary America.

## 1.7 QUESTIONS

Dissenter:

Individual or group at odds with a dominant religious tradition. For instance, both the Puritans and the Quakers were dissenters in the sixteenth century religious context of Europe.

The Quakers grew in numbers, reaching perhaps 60,000 by the 1680s, but this was in the face of harsh repression they had to undergo, like the Puritans, almost all over Europe. What they wanted, therefore, like the Puritans, was to find a territory of refuge abroad, some place in the king's empire where they might live in peace – and, they hoped – attract converts by the grace and purity of their life and faith. For years this searching went on, till at last in 1674, a group of Quakers, including the wealthy William Penn, joined to buy the western half of New Jersey, as the nucleus of their new settlement.

God as supreme authority, and in his image built strong institutions of government, in which the magistrate – prelate was central. Quakers thought of God as supreme love. In that spirit they sought to build societies where power and hierarchy had no place. They believed in the equality of all men and also of the equality of men and women. There was unquestionably a revolutionary orientation in Quaker social and political outlook, emanating of course from Quaker religious engagement.

## UNIT 2 AMERICAN PROSE IN THE PERIOD OF NATIONAL CONSOLIDATION

### Structure

2.0	Objectives
2.1	Introduction: The Literature of Constitutional controversies and Constitutional confirmation
2.2	Letters of the Early Republic
2.3	The Prose of American Romanticism - I
2.4	The Prose of American Romanticism - II
2.5	Let Us Sum Up
2.6	Glossary
2.7	Questions
2.8	Suggested Readings

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit will be to study American prose-writing of the period of national consolidation stretching roughly over the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth century and somewhat further, through the years of Andrew Jackson's presidency (1828-1836) into the era of erosion of nationalist sentiment which then inevitably led to the Civil War. The prose-writing studied in this Unit will include essays and articles on the draft Constitution of 1787 as well as on the Constitution after it was formally enacted and enshrined into law, notably *The Federalist Papers* in the former category and the Bill of Rights in the latter category. Constitutional literature apart, the Unit will focus upon prose-writings of other kinds produced especially during the period 1790 to 1820—articles (in journals and magazines), criticism and epistles. Some of these prose-writings anticipated that era of great flowering of American prose-writing—the so-called American Renaissance—which featured most prominently the literature of the Transcendentalist thinkers. The Unit will conclude with an examination of this literature.

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION: THE LITERATURE OF CONSTITUTIONAL CONTROVERSIES AND CONSTITUTIONAL CONFIRMATION

With the draft Constitution ready, the moment for its ratification arrived, requiring a vote in state conventions, with approval of nine out of the thirteen states essential to ratify it. In New York, where engagement with ratification was intense, a series of newspaper pieces appeared, anonymously, and they tell us much about the nature of the Constitution. These pieces, eighty-five in number, favouring adoption of the Constitution, were written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, and came to be known as the *Federalist Papers* (opponents of the Constitution became known as anti-Federalists).

Written under the pen-name of Publius, the legendary statesman of classical Rome, *The Federalist*, right from "Federalist No. 1" promises "a lesson of moderation to those who are ever so much persuaded of their being in the right in any controversy." Dismissing the "torrent of angry and malignant passions," "the bitterness," and "the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people" of his enemies, Publius assumes

for himself "the evidence of truth" and the high moral ground of "a judicious estimate of our true interests, unperplexed and unbiased by considerations not connected with the public good."

The same high moral ground that the narrator assumes for himself, he also arrogates to the institution of representative government. In "Federalist No. 10" he thus argues that representative government is needed to maintain peace in a society ridden by factional disputes. These disputes came from "the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society." The problem, according to him, is how to control the factional struggles that come from inequalities in wealth. Minority factions can be controlled, he says, by the principle that decisions will be by the vote of the majority.

So the real problem, according to the narrator, is a majority faction, and here the solution is offered by the Constitution, to have "an extensive republic," that is, a large nation ranging over thirteen states, for then "it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other." The influence of factional leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.

This argument can be seen as a sensible argument for having a government, which can maintain order and avoid disorder. But is it the aim of government simply to sustain truce, as a referee between two equally matched fighters. Or is the truce to be sustained only as status-quo, a certain distribution of power and wealth which the government seeks to preserve? In that case, the avoidance of disorder and the maintenance of order on the part of the government becomes a class-biased rather than a class-neutral venture. This interpretation makes sense when one looks at the economic interests and the social backgrounds of the makers of the Constitution.

As part of his argument for a large republic to keep the peace, the narrator tells quite clearly, in "Federalist No. 10" whose peace he wants to keep: "A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it."

When economic interests and social backgrounds are seen behind the political clauses of the Constitution, then the Constitution becomes not simply the creation of liberal democratic authors trying to establish an enlightened society based on the principles of fraternity and equality, but the production of certain social groups trying to maintain their privileges, while conceding just enough rights to enough of the people to ensure popular support.

Elsewhere in *The Federalist Papers*, the narrator writes even more explicitly that the new Union will be able "to repress domestic faction and insurrection." He refers directly to the Shays' Rebellion (named after farmer leader Daniel Shays), a militant anti-state demonstration organized in 1780 in Springfield, Massachusetts, by more than seven hundred armed farmers, most of them veterans of the American Revolution, against the Massachusetts legislature's refusal to issue paper money, as hidden farmers to pay off their creditors. "The tempestuous situation from which Massachusetts has scarcely emerged evinces that dangers of this kind are not merely speculative."

The Shays' Rebellion is cited as an example of the "temporary errors and delusions" which, according to the narrator of *The Federalist Papers*, sometimes afflicts the people and against which is required, to quote from "Federalist No. 63," "the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice, and truth can regain their authority over the public mind."

In the opinion of the narrator of *The Federalist Papers*, the Constitution of the United States itself represents the safeguard of sober judgement against any potential or actual assault on the stability of the Republic. Yet this opinion needs to be offset by an alternative view articulated by Charles Beard which argues that all constitutions are intended to legitimise the governments that enact them and, by extension, the vested interests of power and wealth which run these governments.

Nevertheless when the United States Constitution was finally ratified, it did have the support of much more than merely an elite minority of the United States population. Thus, it was not just the 3 per cent of the population who had large holdings of property, but nearly 33 per cent of the population who were small farmers and an even bigger percentage who were city working men who, more or less, supported the United States Constitution. The Constitution, then, as Howard Zinn has analysed

... illustrates the complexity of the American system: that it serves the interests of a wealthy elite, but also does enough for small property owners, for middle-income mechanics and farmers, to build a broad base of support. The slightly prosperous people who make up this base of support are buffers against the blacks, the Indians, the very poor whites. They enable the elite to keep control with a minimum of coercion, a maximum of law—all made palatable by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.

There were several strategies whereby the Constitution of the United States built up its "broad base of support" among "the slightly prosperous people." The rhetoric of popular participation was employed liberally right from the moment, Washington wrote the letter delivering the Constitution to the Congress on behalf of the Constitutional Convention. Sent "By unanimous Order of the Convention" on September 17, 1787, the letter uses the undifferentiated, first-person plural pronoun to assimilate every level of difference. "In all our deliberations on this subject [differences among the several states] we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union." The litany of first-person plural pronouns in the possessive case conflates and confuses constitution-maker and ordinary citizen, "our deliberations" and "our view" referring to the constitution-makers' perspective but merging with "our Union," the perspective of "every true American."

Washington then alludes to differences that might have been anticipated but that never did actualise. Again, the particular decorum of the framers as gentlemen is also the general decorum of the "true American" perspective. In Washington's words, "the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity." Those who disagree must remember that the document emerged out of "mutual deference and concession" and that it, therefore, "is liable to as few exceptions as could reasonably have been expected." The expected exceptions apart, any challenge to any part of the document violates the decorum of consent and consensus, forgets "the greatest interest of every American" and endangers "our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence." These words follow the tactic of co-option already traced in the preamble of the Constitution, "We the people of the United States," etc., and they pre-figure the constitution-makers' enlarged strategy in the ratification debates. The "people of the United States" ostensibly share the constitution-makers' act of writing through the related act of ratification. Thus, as Robert A. Ferguson has argued, "Agreement with the document looms as the acceptable interpretation of it."

The evolution of these strategies is evident in the pre-ratification debates. At some point in the re-arrangement of twenty-three loose items into the ten tight articles of the final version, the text of the Constitution is closed to interpretation and re-interpretation. Amendments on the Constitution, it is made clear, are to be made as being "part of" or in extension to its main text, which is thereby declared as beyond alteration.

Amendments to the Constitution, instigated largely by the anti-Federalists, more populist than the Federalist with their elitist orientation, takes the form of a Bill of Rights comprising ten clauses to begin with. But the Bill of Rights, safeguarding the liberal democratic freedoms of speech, writing, religion, self-defence and trial by jury, are only added on to a Constitution that remains intact despite every amendment. Indeed the first ten amendments effectively freeze off the primary document. When they are endorsed and enshrined in the text in 1791, they insure that all further changes will be supplementary rather than integral to the language of the constitution-makers.

The constitution-makers were quick to realise that the Bill of Rights strengthened the government. As Madison observed, it gave to the government its "due popularity and stability." The Bill of Rights, plain and proper, and, like the Constitution itself, discouraging interpretations, therefore got through with much less ado than might have been imagined. Each of these first ten amendments is a single sentence with the longest employing one hundred and six words and the shortest just sixteen: five amendments are thirty words or less. Brevity, quite clearly, is deemed to be the soul of consensus.

## 2.2 LETTERS OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC

"From 1790 to 1820, there was not a book, a speech, a conversation, or a thought in the State." So wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1852 about what he considered the cultural blankness of the early republic specifically with reference to New England. Until the 1980s, academic criticism accepted and elaborated this denigrating judgement on post-revolutionary literature. To most readers, there seemed little to admire in the letters of the early republic, apart from its public documents.

The assessment has now been revised, as new interest in the writing of the early Republic has brought fuller appreciation of that writings' purposes and character, but nonetheless it is necessary to analyse the reasons for the endemic neglect of post-revolutionary culture.

The tradition of writing inaugurated in the mid-nineteenth century emerged gradually into a hegemonic prominence as the writings of the American Renaissance. The canonical status earned by Emerson and his contemporaries of the 1830s and the 1840s necessarily sidelined art that was not imaginative, that is, art as religious, moral and ethical forms of discourse. These authors refused to see literature's role as instructional, as influencing readers towards the direction of better citizenship or of conscientious behaviour. These canonical artists strove for a unique voice that communicated the author's extraordinary personality through works, which were intended to express his/her quest for self-realisation.

Corresponding to the unique voice of the artist was a conception of the literary career as a distinct vocation. The author aspired to be a professional, someone who entered into competition with other authors for money and fame. Authorship was assumed to be a full-time activity, not confined to moments stolen from responsibilities as ministers, administrators and politicians.

The distinctive traits of mid-nineteenth century writing were not too much in evidence in the letters of the early Republic. Early republican letters did not invariably anticipate the American Renaissance tradition. In exploring post-revolutionary literature, it is important to remember the edicts of the authors themselves for whom art for art's sake was always subordinate to art for life's sake. Rigidly aesthetic categories as set by the literary canon, which came up later, gave limited recognition to an array of writings inspired by utility. The insistent presence

of non-aesthetic elements in these writings perhaps best explains their devaluation in relation to a canonical literature defined by aesthetic considerations.

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Post-revolutionary American literature was the product of a historical formation dominated by republicanism. Republicanism, the governing ideology of the revolutionary era, regarded one's highest calling as participation in the public realm. Republicans understood "good" conduct as the affirmation of public obligations over private opportunities. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, declared that every young man in a republic must "be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property." The citizen's energies, "may more, life, belongs to his country." So overpowering was the Republican insistence on service before self that it even submerged republicanism's idealisation of economic independence.

Prevailing economic realities encouraged these ideological inclinations. Post-revolutionary United States was centred on production within the home. The great majority of people lived on farms and supported themselves by their own labour. They enjoyed a measure of self-sufficiency in food and in clothing. The under-developed condition of transport tended to restrict commercial transactions within local areas and to inhibit the establishment of extended market networks. In rural areas, exchange retained an orientation towards utility: farmers swapped produce and services and often carried on business without the mediation of cash. Customary arrangements and obligations remained paramount: local autonomy, allegiance to family investments rather than to individual fulfilment, and social valuation of economic activity defined the day-to-day world of most Americans.

The letters of the early Republic reproduced these conditions to a considerable extent. Literary narratives were never viewed as the personal possession of their authors even by the authors themselves who never made any claims for the distinctive individuality of their creations. Narratives were common property, or "public knowledge," and even the appearance of a story in someone else's novel did not preclude its being recycled in a later work of fiction. On the contrary the familiarity of a tale seems to have been in its favour, just as lack of recognition could earn it discredit.

The point can be grasped by glancing at two of the era's most important fictions, Will Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* published in 1789 and usually designated the first American novel, and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette*, which appeared in 1797.

Both books, in the manner typical of the early novel, present themselves as founded on actual events. Both play down the role of the imagination in their making. Both insist upon their practical value as moral instruction and warn against the dangers of interpolated narratives, at least two of which have been shown to be closely patterned on contemporaneous incidents. One, the story of Ophelia and Mr. Martin, which is related in letters 21 through 23, was inspired by the tragic love affair of Perez Morton, a well-connected Bostonian, and his sister-in-law, Frances Aphorip, who committed suicide; the episode was public knowledge at the time Brown wrote his novel. A second nested narrative on the evils of seduction appears as a long footnote to letter 11 and concerns Elizabeth Whitman, a Connecticut woman who is identified by name and whose death has been reported only six months earlier in newspaper obituary notices. This episode also provided the basis for Foster's *The Coquette*, where the historical Elizabeth Whitman resurfaces as the imaginary Eliza Wharton.

The actuality-oriented, corporate-ownership view of narrative, often struggling to contain more inventive elements, appeared everywhere in the letters of the early Republic. In poetry, epic-like recitations of patriotic accomplishments abounded. Joseph Brown Ladd's "The Prospect of America," printed in his *Poems of Aronel* (1786), celebrates military exploits from the war with Britain and memorialises heroic officers by name. Public figures and events provided constant inspiration also for the

drama, from novel (Jus Warren's satirical farce *The Amulet* (1773), which deals with the Boston Massacre; through William Dunlap's historical tragedy *André* (1792), in which George Washington appears as a character along with the British spy he ordered hanged; to a half dozen plays about American troubles with the Barbary pirates, among them Susanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) and Mordcan M. Noah's *The Siege of Tripoli* (1820).

The non-originality, inclination of the writing of the early Republic was bolstered by the emphatic proximity of English literature. About three-quarters of the books published in the United States before 1820 were of English origin. Combined with the absence of an international copyright law, the availability of so many renowned authors in a common tongue created an irresistible temptation to adapt and to imitate and dampened the ambition to cultivate an individual voice. James Kirke Paulding, only half-facetiously, complained that in some genres foreign competition entirely stifled native endeavor. "Were it not for Shakespeare, Milton, Newton, Locke, Bacon, Professor Porson, and a few more illustrious English dramatic writers, the theatres in this country could not exist. Shakespeare's Tom and Jerry is played over and over again; night after night; and Bacon's Abridgement as often, if not oftener."

Not only in imaginative writings, but in journalistic writings as well, English paradigms influenced American production. Early periodicals in America, as in England, evolved out of newspapers and were often indistinguishable from them, a lineage that contested the segregation of aesthetic matters from mundane activities. American newspapers were an important outlet for cultural production; they welcomed poetry, literary essays and vignettes, and their format frequently effaced the division between the everyday and the extraordinary. Thus the twice-weekly *Gazette of the United States* included in its edition for May 28, 1791, a poem, "Laura and Mary" about a coquette whose spurned lover drowns himself, an ode to reviewers, and a piece on English naval architecture, all jostling for space with dispatches from abroad, reports on commerce and politics, and lists of prices current for public securities.

Some papers, more sensitive to generic differentiation, confined their cultural miscellany to the last page under headings such as "Seat of the Muses," "Poetry Corner," and "Repository of Genius." *The Farmer's Weekly Museum of Walpole, New Hampshire*, which Dennis edited during the 1790s, treated readers to a last page called "The Desert." Besides printing poems and essays, including Dennis's celebrated "Lay Preacher" series, a sub-section titled "Nuts" contained jests, curious anecdotes, and fables from Aesop. Like many other newspapers the *Farmer's Weekly Museum* was really a hybrid, its literary content had so prominent a place that the publisher described it as "a magazine in a minor form."

The term "magazine" implies a repository or storehouse, and early American magazines inevitably had an encyclopaedic and eclectic quality that persisted into the nineteenth century. The contents of American magazines, therefore, reflecting the medium's newspaper origins, showed a diversity that transcended the boundaries of the gentlemanly ethos. Many journals, including some of the most prestigious, published articles and short stories holding unconventional opinions. Efforts were made to enlarge the readership to incorporate "every class" (in the phrase of *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository*) "Amelia; or the Faithless Briton—an *Magazine of Philadelphia*, was one of numerous sentimental fictions that appeared in periodicals and were aimed at a wide audience. The story, whose author is unknown, portrays the despoiler of innocence as a British officer. Other stories appealed to native interest by taking economic opportunity as their subject, but the majority of the tales were pirated from English publications and expose their parentage: several, for instance, deal with the evils of primogeniture. Magazines were eager to cultivate female readers also. Articles celebrated female accomplishments and argued for the importance of well-informed nationalist mothers, who served the country by raising

well-inspired sons. The journals became vocal supporters of female education and, occasionally (if infrequently) of female equality.

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## 2.3 THE PROSE OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM - I



Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Poet and essayist lived most of his adult life in Concord

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard round the world.  
- Ralph Waldo Emerson  
in "Concord Hymn"

The democratization of American culture, suggested by the evolution of American periodical literature, expressed itself fully during the Romantic period in America, otherwise also called the period of "the first person singular." Ralph Waldo Emerson, who designated the period thus, described it in the following words.

There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness and have not yet become microscopic: so that man at that instant, extends across the entire scale, and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of night, converses with his eyes and brain with solar and stellar creation. This is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.

This moment of America's coming into its own as a cultural entity—called "American Renaissance" by F. O. Matthiessen and "American Naissance" by Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury—was especially a New England moment, though Herman Melville and Walt Whitman from the state of New York and Edgar Allan Poe from the south contributed to its making. "From 1790 to 1820 there was not a book, a speech, a conversation, or a thought in the State," Emerson said of Massachusetts in his *Journals*; "About 1820, the Channing, Webster, and Everett era began, and we have been bookish and poetical and cogitative since." This is an exaggerated Boston had never neglected the church or the university, its academics and its clerics. It had the *North American Review* from 1815 where arguments for a national literature raged; Cambridge, across the river, had Harvard, the epitome of learning, and Bancroft and Parkinon, Motley and Ticknor, the leading historians; New England was the hub of reform, from temperance and feminism to antislavery, and was central in national politics. Its old Puritanism had been transformed, above all by Unitarianism, which, William Ellery Channing said, showed "the soul is the spring of our knowledge of God," an assumption akin to Emerson's.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's leading role has made the transcendentalism of which he was spokesman seem central, but perhaps it seems more so in retrospect that it did at the time. It was one of the many movements in the air at a point when sects and schisms, factions and faiths, stirred New England life and spread abroad to the nation.



Utopians, mesmerism, abolitionism, anything that, as Charles Dickens put it, looked "a little beyond," suited the contemporary New England temper.

To try to grasp the spirit of transcendentalism is, by definition, to try to grasp the ungraspable—which is precisely what transcendentalism sought to do. What essentially guided its thinking was its dissent from Unitarianism and the Lockean and Newtonian world-view which attempted to understand the human subject and his/her negotiation of objective circumstances in mechanistic cause-and-effect terms. Transcendentalism challenged this world-view, which had persisted so powerfully into the American nineteenth century, through its celebration of the individual self and his/her self-consciousness and its reassertion of an idealistic Neoplatonism that, paradoxically drew it back again toward the Puritan tradition. Its thinking was fed by philosophers like Kant and Swedenborg, Coleridge and Carlyle, European Romantics, who asserted the power of the imagination, the soul as spirit illuminated by the divine. In what John Quincy Adams, the Republic's sixth president from 1824 to 1828, called New England's "bubbling cauldron of religion and politics," in which innumerable isms were concocted daily, transcendentalism spoke to the value of inward spiritual prompting and the need for a private relation between the self and the universe.

On September 9, 1832, when Ralph Waldo Emerson, descended from a long line of New England ministers and himself the minister of the Second Unitarian Church in Boston, announced his skepticism about the Lord's Supper, resigned his ministry and pledged himself to a personal, non-institutional form of faith, very few could have known that a whole new era in the history of the American imagination was under way. At the end of that year, Emerson set sail for Europe in a state of mental crisis to reconsider his position; there he encountered the full force of European Romantic, organicist thought, in religion, philosophy, social opinion, politics and aesthetics. Of that thought, we may fairly say he gave a creative misreading. After Emerson returned a year later, he settled well outside Boston in sleepy Concord, soon to become transcendentalism's capital city. And he now declared himself in his first book, appropriately called *Nature* (1836). Emerson's statement of the innocent vision at work in a natural world was meant as a new beginning for himself and all Americans, and that is what it eventually came to seem.

*The Body of  
B Franklin Printer,  
(Like the Cover of an old Book  
Its Contents torn out  
And strip of its Lettering & Gilding)  
Lies here, Food for Worms;  
But the Work shall not be lost;  
For it will, (as he believ'd) appear once more,  
In a new and more elegant Edition  
Revised and corrected,  
By the Author.*  
- Benjamin Franklin  
his own epitaph, written in 1728  
at the beginning of his career

In its argument for a transformed relation between self and the material world, *Nature* was nothing less than a manifesto serving notice that the Enlightenment tradition of William Byrd II and Benjamin Franklin, what had become "the corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College," no longer lived. It had now to be challenged by the insistence that God had made material nature not as a mere commodity but as a hieroglyph of His Spiritual world. Nature was not merely a challenge to man's powers of domination and exploitation; it spoke directly to the self, to the individual self-consciousness. "To what end is Nature?" Emerson asked: he proposed that it was a scripture, more immediate, more editing and more accessible than any written statement, though it called for its scribe, the "orphic

Poet" who responds to and incorporates its language. Even though he was quickly denounced for his "German insanity," Emerson's radiating conviction began to catch hold of his age, as he had known that it would. By 1838, Harriet Martineau was explaining to her fellow Britons that one could not really know America unless one knew Emerson. In him "one leading quality is to be distinguished . . . modest independence"—"independence equally of thought, of speech, of demeanour, of occupation, and of objects in life." Emerson himself did not embrace what had originated as a derogatory label until his lecture "The Transcendentalist" in 1841 that acknowledged the influence of Kant and asserted that the transcendentalist "believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy." By then this faith was already becoming a movement. From 1836 there was a "Transcendentalist Club" that attracted many New England radical thinkers drawn by Emerson's faith in the self—Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody, the would-be sister-in-law of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was not quite willing to be co-opted into this fraternity.

Independence was the leit-motif. In 1837 Emerson delivered his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard. "The American Scholar." It memorably re-stated the theme that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," and thereby it earned its place as America's declaration of literary independence. And it argued that the scholar in his right state is not simply a thinker but "Man Thinking," an active voice of experience. The theme of independence was extended in "Self-Reliance" (1841), which expressed a central doctrine: divinity existed intimately in every natural life form, in each organic entity. This was no appeal to the acquisitive self projected by many Enlightenment thinkers, nor to the entrepreneurship of their busy commercial age. Emerson's self is ethically opposed to selfishness; his is a quest for the best self one can imagine to merge in ultimate union with the transcendent self, what he called "The Over-Soul" (1841). The religious implications are clear: this selfhood characterises the believer whose identity rests on foundations not of this society or of this world. Indeed Emerson's essays, lectures and sermons, which came in a great outpouring as he toured the country and spoke his powerful message, can be read as a secularised version of the jeremiad and millenarian utterance.

The message that now leapt alive from New England's "bar-rooms, Lyceums, committee rooms," to "fill the world with their thunder," as Emerson put it, was in essence apocalyptic. In *Nature* Emerson was already denouncing the age of the demand our own works and laws and worship." In *Representative Men* (1850) he announced the moment of new power when man extends across the full scale. He took from his ministerial training the prophetic role and spoke in the voice of revelation about "the infinitude of the private mind." "The infinitude of the private mind," according to Emerson, is most evident in the case of the poet. Poetry opens up new epochs and new vistas in our consciousness. "We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air," says Emerson. "This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods." They are, in fact, perceivers of a prior poem, the universe itself.

The sea, the mountain-ridge, Niagara, and every flower-bed, pre-exist, in pre-cantations, which sail like odors in the air, and when any man goes by with an ear sufficiently fine, he overhears them and endeavours to write down the notes without diluting or depraving them. And herein is the legitimation of criticism, in the mind's faith that the poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature with which they ought to be made to tally.

It is Emerson's notion of earth as text and sacrament that makes the place he holds in American literature: between the Puritans with their providential allegory, who

preceded him and the symbolist designers of art who succeeded him. Emerson is a moral thinker and writer; he quests for fundamental truth. But he refuses to transmute the world around him into a simple lexicon of one-to-one meanings. By distinguishing the *fixed* emblem—what he calls “mysticism”—from the *fluid* image, he opens the way to later authors from Herman Melville to Wallace Stevens.

## 2.4 THE PROSE OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM – II

Emerson published *The Poet* in 1844. One year later, on July 4, the anniversary of national independence, Henry David Thoreau began the exercise in personal spiritual independence that led to *Walden*. Ten years later, Whitman published *Leaves of Grass*. Each drew directly on Emerson's thought, and each “dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality” to express an America. Certainly, when Henry David Thoreau began building a cabin near Concord on Emerson's fourteen acres at Walden Pond, many must have recalled Emerson's “Self-Reliance,” and Thoreau himself would see his two-year adventure on the pond's shore as a westward quest for the Emersonian self.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like so as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.

*A lake is the landscape's most beautiful  
 and expressive feature. It is earth's eye;  
 Looking into which the beholder  
 measures the depth of his own nature.*  
 - Henry David Thoreau,  
 In *Walden*

The only one of the transcendentalists actually born in Concord, Thoreau, after a ministerial training, chose a life of what he called “excursions”—schoolteacher, surveyor, handyman, and student of nature. His writing was itself such an “excursion,” a journey to the center of life; as he put it, he travelled much in Concord. His *Journals* (fourteen volumes, 1906, posthumous), his letters and verses, articles and speeches, and his two published books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854), represent the epitome of Emersonian independence. *Walden* is an experience, as well as a description of one.

It is the description, rather than the experience, that Thoreau offers to readers of the book. The “I” of the first page is as much Thoreau the artist, as Thoreau the activist. We look through the “I”/eye of the artist at the “I”/eye of the activist—and beyond, at the pond which reflects the depths of the soul as much as the heights of “the Over-Soul.”

The book Thoreau describes writing at Walden Pond was not *Walden* but *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*. He published this in 1849 in 1000 copies largely at his own expense. Four years later he was forced to undertake storage of the remaining 706: “I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his

labor?" It has reasonably been surmised that the failure of *A Week* generated the artistic complexity of *Walden*. In no position to publish, Thoreau went on reading sections of his new book to friends and rearranging passages to heighten their effect until publication became possible. Thus, in the book that gradually took shape imagination transformed experience into parable, or what Thoreau called "scripture." Part of this transformative effect lies in the narrator's own persona—his assumption of the voice of a seer and a sage. But equally important is the role assigned to the reader. Most implied readers are like the text's John Farmer, with commitments and compulsions, which make their passage to the pond impossible. Yet, by joining John Farmer in the appropriate purifying rituals and listening for the beckoning sound of the flute (that Thoreau did play), the readers, too, as Thoreau's disciples might some day visit Walden Pond.

I claim to be altogether radical -  
that's my chief stock in trade: take  
the radicalism out of the Leaves - do  
you think anything worthwhile would  
be left?  
- Walt Whitman,  
quoted by Horace L. Traubel  
in *Walt Whitman in  
Camden*



Photograph of Walt Whitman

Walden is not a place of total solitude. The railroad runs by it, society is close. Thoreau was no communitarian like George Ripley or Bronson Alcott, but he engaged the community. An abolitionist, he spoke out for John Brown, the anti-slavery radical; when the Mexican War burdened his conscience, he spent a night in jail rather than pay taxes for its support. His act became a symbolic statement: when asked why he was behind bars, Thoreau wondered why any decent person was outside, supporting an unjust state. In another emblematic gesture, he declared his will to resign from all the institutions he could not remember having joined. The most durable impact transcendentalism made on social action followed Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (1849); it guided Mahatma Gandhi's campaign of passive resistance to British rule in India and the tactics of civil disobedience used in the United States itself against racial discrimination and the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

But the transcendentalist who was able to create an aesthetic out of the interaction between society and the individual was Walt Whitman. It is tempting to see Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson as part of a single lineage: Emerson the conceptualiser, Thoreau the executive, and Whitman the celebrator. But if this clarifies, it also simplifies, for each of these transcendentalists was truly his own. Emerson—despite his insistence that the world was real and not a signifier for abstractions—remained closest to philosophical idealism and the essentialism of Kant. Thoreau expressed a far more direct contact with the natural world, as also the world of fellow human beings, despite his stated aversion to the trappings of a materialist existence. Whitman always retained a transcendentalist spirituality, but the mysterious value of life lay finally in what he directly encountered through his senses. The empirical merges with the essential and so his long continuous poem is

centripetal as well as centrifugal—a convoluted yet comprehensive “word-book,” as he called it, whose omnivorous pages can encompass the leaves of grass and the leaves of books, permanence and mutability, the shifting progress of America from rural agricultural to urban industrial nation.

## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have studied American prose-writing of the period of national consolidation stretching roughly over the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth century and somewhat further, through the years of Andrew Jackson’s presidency (1828-1836) into the era of erosion of nationalist sentiment which then inevitably led to the Civil War. The prose-writings studied in this Unit include essays and articles involving issues thrown up by the draft Constitution of 1787 as well as by the Constitution once it was formally enacted and enshrined into law. Constitutional literature apart, this Unit has focused upon prose-writings of other kinds produced especially during the period 1790 to 1820—in periodicals, as criticism and as epistles. Some of these prose-writings anticipated that era of great flowering of American prose-writing the so-called American Renaissance—which featured most prominently the literature of the Transcendentalist thinkers. The unit concludes with an examination of this literature.

## 2.6 GLOSSARY

### American Renaissance:

Term coined by F. O. Matthiessen as title for his seminal critical study of “art and expression” in the works of five nineteenth century United States authors, namely, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman.

Matthiessen used the term in 1941 to denote what he and many others after him, thought to be the founding moment of the American literary tradition in terms of the self – awareness and self-consciousness on the part of a generation of American (mostly male, white, New England) writers that they were establishing a literary tradition parallel to but distinct from English/European literary traditions, a tradition devoted to use Matthiessen’s words, “to the possibilities of democracy.”

### Epistles:

Articles or essays written in the form of letters, epistles represented a fairly common and popular literary genre in eighteenth century Europe and America.

### Republicanism:

The cornerstone of American democracy, republicanism or the government by the public was always affirmed as the justification of the United States of America since its founding in the 1770s.

The world at large was still accustomed to the rule of monarchs and aristocrats, and since the American War of Independence it had scoffed at Americans

and their republican experiment. The "people", it had been said over and over again, could not govern themselves. Put them in any sort of great crisis and they will prove too ignorant to meet its challenges. All peoples needed monarchies and aristocracies, and the "enlightened" superintence of an oligarchy of the powerful and the wealthy to give them good government.

Republicanism in America however received its ultimate validation when the United States managed to preserve itself as a Union through the Civil War on the strength of a majority consensus on issues around which the war was fought.

A philosophy or philosophies oriented towards the envisaging and realising of a perfect social order. Some of these philosophies were very popular in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and America.

### Utopianism:

A movement for the abrogation of the institution of slavery whereby, from the seventeenth century onwards men, women and children from Africa had been systematically imported to the United States of America and some of the Latin American countries and made to live and work as chattel slaves mainly on cotton, rice and tobacco plantations.

### Abolitionism:

The abolitionist movement, though initiated in the 1790s, with the convention for Promoting the Abolition of slavery, actually picked up momentum only by the 1830s. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, a twenty-six years old newspaperman from New England who ran an abolitionist journal called The Liberator, helped to form the New England Anti-Slavery Society, which, in 1933, expanded into a national anti-slavery society. This organisation articulated the agenda of abolitionism: free the slaves now.

From then on it was no holds barred abolitionism till the slaves were actually freed in 1865.

### Unitarianism:

A religious faith closely linked to the eighteenth century Enlightenment enthusiasm for reason and science as well as to the growing humanitarianism of the nineteenth century. Unitarianism was a reaction to the excesses of Puritanism.

Its name came from Unitarianism's central belief that the concept of the Trinity – God in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy spirit – does not stand to critical examination. God, to Unitarians, is a single person. Christ, while divinely inspired, was merely a human being charged by God to teach humanity the message of love.

Beyond that, God has left human beings entirely on their own. His spirit does not move about here on

earth entering people's souls and doing mighty things in the world.

Human beings, the Unitarians believed, are fundamentally reformable. Enlighten them with science and reason, and they will gradually rise in goodness and greatness. This was the core of the theology preached by William Ellery Channing, a quiet New England clergyman who by the mid-1820s had emerged as the spiritual leader of the Unitarians.

People who later became leading literary figures - Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes and others, came under Channing's influence. From him they learned that their task in life was to serve other members of society who needed their service. Among such New Englanders, Unitarians inspired reform movements that attacked slavery, worked for the spread of free public schools to the common people, and promoted the idea of peace between nations.

Transcendentalism:

A partly intellectual and partly activist movement emanating out of the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, America's poet - priest from the mid-1830s to the Civil War.

Emerson's teaching centred around the message of personal salvation in an age of dehumanising commodification of human identities and relationships: the cultivation of self-hood. We must develop a serene and sturdy self-reliance, finding our guiding values within our souls. A healthy society evolves out of the soulfulness of individuals rather than out of the sustainability of institutions.

What made this almost anarchic, world-view valid in Emerson's mind? The Oversoul (another name for God), he said, dwells in each person, and we may rely upon its guidance. The soul that we sense within us is a fragment of this over-soul, which is after all the transcendent reality. The world surrounding us, that is, nature, constantly and consistently provides us with intimations of this reality.

The most spectacular of Emerson's follower younger people who called themselves transcendentalists, idolized their master and took his home in Concord, Massachusetts, as their source of inspiration. They formed communes such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands dedicated to demonstrating that a purely competitive and consumerist lifestyle could be cast aside. In a truly loving community all could share equally, labour equally, exist equally, make decisions without anyone being in "authority" and usher in the perfect society of brotherhood and sisterhood.

In these communities the corruptions of modern society and its oppressive institutions would be replaced by completely voluntarist and egalitarian way of life. Nevertheless, despite the best intentions of their promoters, these communities did not last long. The very freedom of will and action which they afford to their members, since restraints of any kind was regarded as being inimical to the integrity of individuals, made communitarian living impractical, and ultimately, impossible.

Transcendentalism thrived for a while therefore as a critical perspective on mainstream society, but never as a blueprint for an alternative social order.

Neo-Platonism:

A philosophy or philosophies deriving from Plato's notion the objects of our material world are all illusory, being reflections of ideal objects in a transcendent, non-material world.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Examine the role of *The Federalist Papers* and the Bill of Rights in the making of the Constitution of the United States in its final shape.
2. Comment on the general character of letters of the early American republic. What were the essential aspects of the Transcendentalist school of writing?
3. Do Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman necessarily inhabit the same literary tradition?

2.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Same as Unit 1, and

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism. A History of American Literature*, 1991.

Van Wyck Brooks. *The Flowering of New England, 1815-1865*, 1936.

F.O. Matthiessen. *American Renaissance. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, 1941.

David S. Reynolds. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, 1988.

Lawrence Buell. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*, 1973.



## UNIT 3 THE 'OTHER' SIDE OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

### Structure

3.0	Objectives	3.0
3.1	Introduction: The Sense of American Mission in the Mid-nineteenth Century	3.1
3.2	The Indian Response to the American Mission	3.2
3.3	The Working Class White Response to the American Mission	3.3
3.4	The Black Response to the American Mission	3.4
3.5	Let Us Sum Up	3.5
3.6	Questions	3.6
3.7	Suggested Readings	3.7

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit, as its title suggests, will be to look at the underside of cultural production, prolific as it was, of the era of American Romanticism. The so-called Romantic Movement in America, which extended through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, witnessed a tremendous efflorescence of creative energies in literature and the arts. This renaissance in the cultural realm synchronized with a resurgence in the material arena, with America gradually coming into its own as a modern industrial nation-state. The boom in industrial manufacture was an offshoot of the rise in agricultural productivity, and together these became factors in the enhancement of the per capita income and the general improvement of living standards. The vast interior of what is now the entire territory of the United States of America was invaded by hundreds of thousands of settlers moving westward from the east coast, taking up cotton, corn and wheat lands. New towns took shape, old towns expanded into cities, and cities formed the nuclei of new states which sprang up on all sides in the wilderness, a new one entering the Union about every two and a half years. Enterprising persons saw undreamed-of wealth before them.

Needless to say, these enterprising persons were all white males of an affluent background. The benefits of 'progress' were for them and them only, while women, Indians, ordinary whites, and Blacks were either passive spectators or actively incurred the expenses of this 'progress.'

This Unit will examine the responses of these marginalised social groups to America's consolidation as a nation-state.

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION: THE SENSE OF AN AMERICAN MISSION IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

America of the mid-nineteenth century was a young nation and a nation of the young. Its mainstream inhabitants were ever ready to break any barriers on their self-actualisation and self-aggrandisement, swept by a romantic feeling that their country had a transcendent national destiny. America's first great historian, George Bancroft, rejoiced that his nation would "allure the world to freedom by the beauty of its example." "How could America help but exert," asked Charles Hodge, "a greater influence on the human family than any other nation that has yet existed?" God

himself, people said, had America under his special care. Had he not ensured a victory for the country in the War of Independence against Britain? Had he not granted it a miraculous second chance to fulfill its destiny as a New Jerusalem. Clearly, Americans said, God had a great work in the world for them to perform. Side by side with this arrogance plus confidence vis-a-vis their future as a nation, there was another mood as well, one not so often revealed to foreign visitors. America's bursting national prosperity filled many people with gloomy foreboding. In 1842 Reverend Caleb Stetson warned:

The basis of our civilisation is wealth. The love of money is almost the universal passion. The inordinate pursuit of it for the gratification of avarice, vanity, pride and ambition, has deeply corrupted the principles of the country, and nearly destroyed all generous public feeling.

Prosperity, such critics said, had in some way turned a republican dream into a nightmarish jungle of unprincipled dollar-chasers. American idealists knew that they had to prove before European sceptics that democracy was a workable, indeed better, form of government than aristocracy. The young Massachusetts politician Daniel Webster, using an idiom familiar to contemporaries, said in the mid-1820s that "this lovely land, these benign institutions, the dear purchase of our fathers," constituted a "sacred trust" for all generations.

Nevertheless the promise of democracy clearly elided the issue of the rights of certain social groups, for example, women, Indians, ordinary whites and Blacks.

Women, for instance, were stereotyped into the role of glorious motherhood, and thereby eschewed from any decision-making agency in the world outside the home. The woman's job was to keep the home neat and tidy and cheerful—a haven of security and stability away from the stresses of the world outside. In 1819, one pious wife wrote: "... the air of the world is poisonous. You must carry an antidote with you, or the infection will prove fatal."

In order that women make the antidote effective, *The Young Lady's Book* of 1830 advised that "... in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her." And one woman wrote, in 1850, in the book *Greenwood Leaves*: "True feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood." Another book, *Recollections of a Southern Matron*, recorded thus: "If any habit of his [the husband] annoyed me, I spoke of it once or twice, calmly, then bore it quietly." Giving women "Rules for Conjugal and Domestic Happiness," one book ended with: "Do not expect too much."

The cult of domesticity for the woman was a way of winning her over with a doctrine of "separate but equal"—giving her work of equal but separate importance to that of man. Within that "equality" there was the fact that woman's labour as housewife was entirely unpaid for, she could not own property and had no right to vote.

Marriage enchained, and motherhood doubled the chains. One girl wrote in 1791: "The die is about to be cast which will probably determine the future happiness or misery of my life. I have always anticipated the event with a degree of solemnity almost equal to that which will terminate my present existence."

Marriage enchained, and motherhood doubled the chains. One woman, writing in 1813, wailed: "The idea of soon giving birth to my third child and the consequent duties I shall be called to discharge distresses me so I feel as if I should sink." This despondency was lightened by the thought that something important was given to the woman to do: to maintain the purity of the household and to hold it up as an emblem of ethical living.

3.2 THE INDIAN RESPONSE TO THE AMERICAN MISSION

If women, of all the marginalised groups in a society dominated by white males of an affluent background, were closest to home (indeed, in the home), the most interior, then the Indians were the most exterior, the most distant from home. Thus while women were dealt with by pulverization,

And so, the policy of Indian Removal, as it has been euphemistically called, cleared the land for white occupancy between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, cleared it for cotton in the south and for grain in the north, for immigration and the building of a huge continental empire.

Statistics tell the story of the devastating implications of the Indian Removal policy: Michael Rogin's *Fathers and Children* documents some facts and figures. In 1790, there were 3,900,000 Americans, and most of them lived within 50 miles of the Atlantic Ocean. In 1830, there were 13 million Americans, and most of them had crossed the Appalachian Mountains into the Mississippi Valley—that huge expanse of land crisscrossed by rivers flowing into the Mississippi from east and west. In 1820, 120,000 Indians lived east of the Mississippi. In 1840, fewer than 30,000 were left. Most of them had been forced to migrate westward.



Tecumseh

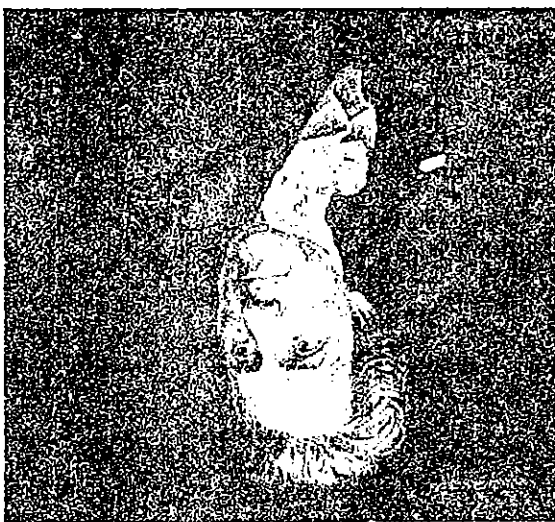
Indian removal was necessary for the opening of the vast American lands, to agriculture, to industry, to markets, to money, to the development of the modern capitalist economy. Land was indispensable for all this, and after the War of Independence, huge sections of land were bought up by rich speculators, including George Washington and Patrick Henry. In North Carolina, rich tracts of land belonging to the Chickasaw Indians were put on sale, although the Chickasaws were among the few Indian tribes fighting for the American against the British, and a treaty had been signed with them guaranteeing their land. John Donelson, a state surveyor, ended up with 20,000 acres of land near what is now Chattanooga. His son-in-law

Under Jackson, who became President of the United States in 1828, and the man he chose to succeed him, Martin Van Buren, seventy thousand Indians east of the

Jackson himself described how the treaties were obtained: "we addressed ourselves feelingly to the predominant and governing passion of all Indian tribes i.e., their avarice or fear." He encouraged white squatters to move into Indian settlements, then told the Indians the government could not remove the whites and so they had better cede the lands or be wiped out. He also, Rogin writes, "practised extensive bribery."

From 1814 to 1824, in a series of treaties with the different tribes of Indians, whites took over three-fourths of Alabama and Florida, one-third of Tennessee, one-fifth of Georgia and Mississippi, and parts of Kentucky and North Carolina. Andrew Jackson played a key role in those treaties, and, according to Michael Rogin, "is friends and relatives received many of the patronage appointments—as Indian agents, traders, treaty commissioners, surveyors and land agents."

Andrew Jackson, president from 1828 to 1835, polarized American politics and inaugurated the second party system.



Angered when fellow Indians were induced to cede a great tract of land to the United States government, Tecumseh organised in 1811 an Indian gathering of five thousand, on the bank of the Tallapoosa River in Alabama, and told them: "Let the white race perish. They seize your land; they corrupt your women, they trample on the ashes of your dead! Back whence they came upon a trail of blood, they must be driven."

The way, and the only way, to check and to stop this evil, is for all the Redmen to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first and should be yet; for it was never divided, but belongs to all for the use of each. That no part has a right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers—those who want all and will not do with less.

The Indian response to the white invasion epitomised one of the most important themes of the literary expression of the Indian peoples of North America since the early years of colonisation. By the start of the nineteenth century, there were some excellent examples of Indian protest statements, always of course in the oral mode. A statement made in 1809 by Tecumseh, a Shawnee chief, exhorting the different tribes of Indians to unite against the common enemy remains the most important articulation of this genre.

was equally successful in his land deals. This was Andrew Jackson, a future president of the United States.

Mississippi were forced westward. In the north, there weren't that many, and the Indians of Illinois were removed, after the Black Hawk War. When Chief Hawk was taken captive after defeat in 1832, he made a surrender speech:

I fought hard. But your guns were well aimed. The bullets flew like birds in the air, and whizzed by our ears like the wind through the trees in the winter. My warriors fell around me . . . The sun rose dim on us in the morning, and at night it sunk in a dark cloud, and looked like a ball of fire. That was the last sun that shone on Black Hawk . . . He is now a prisoner to the white men . . . He has done nothing for which an Indian ought to be ashamed. He has fought for his countrymen, the squaws and paposes, against white men who came year after year, to cheat them and take away their lands. You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. They ought to be ashamed of it. Indians are not deceitful. The white men speak bad of the Indian and look at him spitefully. But the Indian does not tell lies. Indians do not steal.

An Indian who is as bad as the white men could not live in our nation; he would be put to death, and eaten up by the wolves. The white men are bad schoolmasters; they carry false books, and deal in false actions; they smile in the face of the poor Indian to cheat them; they shake them by the hand to gain their confidence, to make them drunk, to deceive them, and ruin their wives. We told them to leave us alone, and keep away from us; they followed on and beset our paths, and they coiled themselves among us, like the snake. They poisoned us by their touch. We were not safe. We lived in danger. We were becoming like them, hypocrites and liars, adulterous lazy drones, all talkers and no workers.

The white men do not scalp the head; but they do worse—they poison the heart . . . Farewell, my nation! . . . Farewell to Black Hawk.

Protest statements apart, North American Indian literary expression from the pre-Civil War period may be classified under at least two heads—collective myths, tales and songs transcribed by ethnologists and personalised narratives by individual leader figures of one tribe or another. Although serious study of American Indian literature has taken place primarily since the beginning of the twentieth century, as early as the early nineteenth century scholars often recognised the vital significance of the oral tradition of the American Indians. No doubt, the most tall claim in this respect was made by Walter Channing who, writing in the *North American Review* in 1815, called upon the American Indian tradition as one means of establishing a national literature for America. Remarkable upon the fact that there was, as of then, no American national literature, insofar as there was, as of then, no American national culture, Channing argued that the oral tradition of America's "aborigines" could be said to constitute the native literary expression of North America.

Channing's assessment emphasises those features of the American Indian tradition that modern scholars have continued to recognise as central to the tradition. Although it is very difficult to generalise about a tradition incorporating hundreds of diverse dialects and languages, there is a pervasive inclination in American Indian literature towards a consonance between artistic structure and organic process. Native American literature received its inspiration from the rhythms of nature—the cycle of the seasons and of the human body; it often employs iteration and repetition to create an organic compact with the surrounding aural and visual world. Frequently, commonplace characters and incidents are infused with larger-than-life mystic elements. Harmonious wholeness with the universe is the subject of much

ceremonial material, whose rhythms function to restore schisms made by human beings between self, the community and nature.

The 'Other' Side of American Romanticism

### 3.3 THE WORKING-CLASS WHITE RESPONSE TO THE AMERICAN MISSION

What did "progress" signify for the American whites? To be sure for the white Americans in general the period under review was a better period than ever before in American history. But for the working-class white Americans in particular, it was a time of trials and tribulations nonetheless.

"The full extent of working-class consciousness of those years—as of any years—is lost in history," writes Howard Zinn, "but fragments remain and make us wonder how much of this always existed under the practical silence of working people."

In 1827 an "Address . . . before the Mechanics and Working Classes, . . . of Philadelphia" was recorded, written by an "Unlettered Mechanic," probably a young shoemaker, who said:

We find ourselves oppressed on every hand—we labor hard in producing all the comforts of life for the enjoyment of others, while we ourselves obtain but a scanty portion, and even that in the present state of society depends on the will of employers.

Frances Wright of Scotland, an early utopian socialist, was invited by Philadelphia working men to speak on the Fourth of July 1829 to one of the first city-wide associations of labor unions in the United States. She asked if the War of Independence had been fought "to crush down the sons and daughters of your country's industry under . . . neglect, poverty, vice, starvation, and disease . . ." She wondered if the new technology was not lowering the dignity of human labor, making people into appendages of machines, crippling the minds and bodies of child laborers.

Later that year, George Henry Evans, an editor of the *Workingman's Advocate*, wrote "The Working Men's Declaration of Independence." Among its list of "facts" submitted to "candid and impartial" fellow-citizens:

1. The laws of levying taxes are . . . operating most oppressively on one class of society.
  3. The laws of private incorporation are all partial . . . favoring one class of society at the expense of another.
  6. The laws . . . have deprived nine tenths of the members of the body politic, who are not wealthy, of the equal means to enjoy "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" . . . The lien law in favour of the landlords against tenants . . . is one illustration among innumerable others.
- Evans believed that "all on arriving at adult age are entitled to equal property."

A "Trades' Union" meeting in Boston in 1834, including both men and women workers from various trades and from various regions of the country, referred to the Declaration of Independence:

We hold . . . that laws which have a tendency to raise any peculiar class above their fellow citizens, by granting special privileges, are contrary to and in defiance of chosen primary principles.

Our public system of education, which so liberally endows those seminaries of learning, which are only accessible to the wealthy, while our common schools are so illly provided for . . . Thus even in childhood the poor are apt to think themselves inferior . . .

During those years, as Philip Foner has assiduously shown in his book *History of the Labor Movement in the U.S., TRADE UNIONS WERE IN THEIR FORMATIVE STAGES*. The courts called them conspiracies to restrict trade and therefore illegal as when in New York twenty-five members of the Union Society of Journey-men Tailors were found guilty of "conspiracy to injure trade, riot, assault, battery." The judge, levying fines, said: "In this favored land of law and liberty, the road to advancement is open to all . . . Every American knows or ought to know that he has no better friend than the laws and that he needs no artificial combination for his protection. They are of foreign origin and I am led to believe mainly upheld by foreigners.

A handbill was then circulated throughout the city:

**"THE RICH AGAINST THE POOR!"** Judge Edwards, the tool of the aristocracy, against the people! Mechanics and working men! A deadly blow has been struck at your liberty! . . . They have established the precedent that working men have no right to regulate the price of labor, or, in other words, the rich are the only judges of the wants of the poor man.

At City Hall Park, 27,000 people gathered to denounce the court decision, three months later, a convention of working-class people and farmers. The convention met in Utica, drew up a Declaration of Independence from existing political parties, and established an Equal Rights party.

Although they ran their own candidates for office, there was no great confidence in the ballot as a means of effecting change. One of the great ideologues of the movement, Seth Luther told a Fourth of July rally: "We will try the ballot box first. If that will not effect our righteous purpose, the next and last resort is the cartridge box."

Such are the little-known instances of working class white literature produced during the era of "progress" in America.

### 3.4 THE BLACK RESPONSE TO THE AMERICAN MISSION

Paradoxically, the literature produced by the black slaves, voicing the Black response to American "progress," is better-known than working-class white literature, despite the fact that the black slave had fewer rights, even no rights at all, as compared to working-class whites.

The initial impetus towards literary expression by black slaves came from free blacks. Free blacks in the North (who numbered about 130,000 in 1830 and about 200,000 in 1850) agitated for the abolition of slavery, even as black slaves in the South struggled to cope with "the peculiar institution." In 1829, David Walker, son of a slave, but born free in North Carolina, moved to Boston, where he sold old clothes. The pamphlet he wrote and printed, *Walker's Appeal*, became widely known. It infuriated slaveholders. Georgia offered a reward of \$10,000 to any one who would deliver Walker alive, and \$1000 to anyone who would kill him. Such was the insidious influence of his *Appeal*.

There was no slavery in history, even that of the Israelites in Egypt, worse than the slavery of the Africans in America, Walker opined. . . . show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintains, that the Egyptians heaped the insupportable insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family." Walker was scathing about his fellow blacks who would want to be like white folks. "I would wish, candidly . . . to be understood, that I would not give a pinch of snuff to be married to any white person I ever saw in all the days of my life."

Blacks must fight for their freedom, he said:

Let our enemies go on with their butcheries, and at once fill up their cup. Never make an attempt to gain our freedom or natural right from under our cruel oppressors and murderers, until you see your way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed. . . . God has been pleased to give us two eyes, two hands, two feet, and some sense in our hands as well as they. They have no more right to hold us in slavery than we have to hold them. . . . Our sufferings will come to an end, in spite of all the Americans this side of eternity. Then we will want all the learning and talents among ourselves, and perhaps more, to govern ourselves - "Every dog must have its day;" the American's is coming to an end.

One summer day in 1830, David Walker was found dead near the doorway of his shop in Boston.

However, even blacks under slavery exhibited a rare spirit of resistance. Lawrence Levine in his book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, gives a picture of a rich culture among enslaved blacks, a complex mixture of repudiation and adaptation, through the creativity of songs and stories. Narratives often had double meanings. The line "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan," often meant that slaves dreamt of moving from South to North, from slavery to freedom. During the Civil War, slaves began to make up new narratives with bolder messages: "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be saved." Levine describes resistance of this kind as "pre-political," expressed in countless modes of everyday existence. Religion, magic, music, art, were all ways, according to him, for slaves to resist their dehumanisation.

Some born in slavery acted out the unfulfilled desire of millions Frederick Douglass, a slave sent to Baltimore to work as a servant and as a laborer in the shipyard, somehow learned to read and write, and at twenty-one, in the year 1838, escaped from slavery, and became the most famous black man of his time, as lecturer, journalist, author. In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, he recalled his first childhood thoughts about his condition:

Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? Was there ever a time when this was not so? How did the relation commence?

Once, however, engaged in the inquiry, I was not very long in finding out the true solution of the matter. It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery: nor was I long in finding out another important truth, viz: what man can make, man can unmake. . . .

I distinctly remember being, even then, most strongly impressed with the idea of being a free man some day. . . .



The Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850 by the federal government made it easy for slave owners to recapture ex-slaves or simply to pick up blacks they claimed had run away. Free blacks protested the Fugitive slave Act, denouncing President Fillmore, who signed it, and Senator Daniel Webster, who supported it. One of these was J.W. Loguen, son of a black slave and her white owner. He had escaped to freedom on his master's horse, gone to college, and was now a minister in Syracuse, New York. He spoke to a meeting in that city in 1850:

The time has come to change the tones of submission into tones of defiance—and to tell Mr. Fillmore and Mr. Webster, if they propose to execute this measure upon us, to send on their blood-hounds . . . I received my freedom from Heaven, and with it came the command to defend my title to it . . . I don't respect this law—I don't fear it—I won't obey it! It outlaws me and I outlaw it . . .

Loguen made his home in Syracuse a point of departure for runaway slaves leaving for Canada. His reminiscences on his own years as a slave chattel came to the attention of his former mistress, and she wrote to him, asking him either to return or to send her \$1000 in compensation. Loguen's reply to her was printed in the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*:

Mrs. Sarah Logue . . . You say you have offers to buy me, and that you shall sell me if I do not send you \$1000; and in the same breath and almost in the same sentence, you say, 'You know we raised you as we did our own children. Woman, did you raise your own children for the market? Did you raise them for the whipping post? Did you raise them to be driven off, bound to a coffin in chains? . . . Shame on you!

If you or any other speculator on my body and rights, wish to know how I regard my rights, they need but come here, and lay their hands on me to enslave me . . . Yours, etc. J.W. Loguen

Frederick Douglass knew that the shame of slavery was not just that of the slave traders and slave owners, but of the whole nation. On the Fourth of July, 1852, he gave an Independence Day address:

Fellow Citizens: Pardon me, and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice embodied in that Declaration of Independence extended to us? And am I, therefore called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits, and to express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim?

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have examined some of the oral and written responses of some of the major minority groups within the emerging United States nation-state, viz. women,

Indians, working-class whites and Blacks, to the process of national consolidation of the erstwhile colonies of Britain in America. These responses epitomise the till-recently ignored and unacknowledged literary expression of these minority groups, underlying the 'sublime' utterances of voices from the white majority, including those of the Transcendentalists.

### 3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the marginalisation of women as a social group within the process of national consolidation of the United States of America in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries.
2. What were the most important themes of American Indian literary expression during the period under review in this Unit?
3. To what extent does working-class literary expression during the period under review in this Unit represent the true condition of working class whites of America in that age?
4. What were the most important themes of Black American literary expression during the period under review in this Unit?

### 3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Alexis, de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*, 1835-36.

Dale, Van Every. *The Disinherited: The Lost Birthright of the American Indian*, 1976.

Eleanor, Flexner. *A Century of Struggle*, 1975.

Eugene Genovese. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 1974.

J. Lawrence Levine. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 1977.

Julius Lester. Ed. *To Be a Slave*, 1968.

Michael Rogin. *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*, 1975.

Nancy, Colt. *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 1977.

Paul, C. Nagel. *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality 1798-1898*, 1971.

Philip Foner. *A History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, 4 vols., 1947. -- *We, the Other People*, 1976.

Robert S. Starobin. Ed. *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves*, 1974.

Samuel Yellow. *American Labor Struggles*, 1974.

There was another question to be solved as well. Between the territories of Oregon and Washington towards the north-west on the one hand and the territories of Texas, Missouri and Arkansas towards the south-east on the other hand, there lay a vast unorganised region occupied only by Indians. There was much pressure to declare this region open for settlement. Much of the clamor came from the booming state of Missouri where population rose from 385,000 in 1840 to 685,000 in 1850 and would top the million mark by 1860. (Its slave population also grew rapidly, from 87,000 in 1850 to 115,000 in 1860.) Missouri's prosperity depended on the productivity of its many hemp and tobacco plantations, based on the labor of thousands of slaves. This

The trouble originated in the need to solve western problems. With California growing rapidly and settlers moving into Oregon and Washington, a railroad was needed to link these areas to the rest of the nation. Some possible routes were surveyed for this purpose.

In 1854, however, the slavery problem suddenly re-opened. The Kansas-Nebbraska Act of that year and the turmoil that followed in Kansas disrupted and divided the nation as the war in Vietnam did more than a century later.

The Fugitive Slave Act, enacted in 1850 by the federal government of the United States, was part of an attempt by the federal government to repair relations between the Northern and the Southern states which had been damaged due to several reasons. The Act made it easy for slave-owners to re-capture ex-slaves or simply to pick up blacks they claimed had run away.

## 4.1 THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN PROSE AROUND THE CIVIL WAR

The aim of this Unit will be to study American prose-writing of the period around the Civil War stretching from the middle decades of the nineteenth century, which witnessed a gradual dispersal of the post-Declaration-of-Independence solidarity as a nation, to the years of Reconstruction of post-war America. The prose-writings studied in this Unit will include transcripts of debates which took place on the subject of slavery as well as other issues of North-South confrontation. The Unit will include also reviews of literature on the Civil War itself as well as on its immediate aftermath.

## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

4.0	Objectives
4.1	The Context of American Prose around the Civil War
4.2	The debates on slavery and other issues of North-South confrontation
4.3	The Prose of the American Civil War-I.
4.4	The Prose of the American Civil War-II
4.5	Let Us Sum Up
4.6	Questions
4.7	Suggested Readings

Structure

## UNIT 4 AMERICAN PROSE AROUND THE CIVIL WAR

led many people to look eagerly to rich lands beyond the Missouri River. Speculators appealed to the federal government to throw open the "Indian country."

A group of Democrats who called themselves "Young America," led by Stephen A. Douglass of Illinois, were fascinated by the prospect of opening up the West to settlement. In January 1854 Douglass moved to secure two objectives: get national support for a central railroad route across the continent, and open the region beyond the Missouri for settlement. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, he proposed a bill that would establish a territorial government for the whole of the Indian country westward of Missouri and make it possible for slavery to move into the region on the basis of popular sovereignty. In particular, the bill would create two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, one implicitly for slavery and the other implicitly against slavery; deny Congress any role in deciding the status of slavery in these territories; and in any case facilitate the passage of slave-holders with their slave through these territories.

The Northern states exploded in rage at what they regarded as a Southern conspiracy. The south was accused of attempting to spread its hegemony over Northerners. Debate over the bill raged in Congress for four months. "The unanimous sentiment of the North," asserted the *New York Tribune*, "is indignant resistance. The whole population is full of it. . . ." Northern churches united as never before to arouse public opinion. "For the last time God has called upon the North," cried out the Congregational minister Henry Ward Beecher. "Let the conscience of the North settle this question, not her fears. God calls us to a religious duty."

But the Southerners carried the day with the help of their sympathisers from the North. Despite all protests, the Senate enacted the Kansas-Nebraska bill on March 3, 1854, after an all-night debate, by a vote of thirty-seven to fourteen. Two and a half months later, the House of Representatives did the same, by the bare margin of three votes.

The people of Missouri were determined to make the newly created Territory of Kansas, contiguous to its own borders, into a slave state. Otherwise they would be hemmed in on three sides by free states. Slaves would constantly run away, especially in western Missouri, where freedom would be just across the Missouri River.

Southerners were especially outraged at the activities of the New England Emigrant Aid Company. With great public fanfare it gathered funds to send organised groups of Northern settlers to Kansas. Though in actuality it sent, altogether, only some 2000 settlers, of whom perhaps a third returned to their homes, its work was exaggerated in gigantic proportions in the Missourian mind. Everyone on the pro-slavery side referred constantly to the company as the embodiment of Yankee meddling and moralising. When in July 1854 the first party of Yankee settlers aided by the company arrived in Lawrence, they were immediately visited by armed Missourians who demanded that they leave the territory at once.

The fact was, however, that Yankee settlers still continued to pour into the Territory of Kansas. They were not aggressive anti-slavery activists but ordinary farmers who wanted land without black people teeming around on it. Meanwhile the few slave-owners came to the territory. Why go into an area where the future of slavery was in doubt, while Arkansas and Texas were eagerly welcoming slave-owning immigrants? The basis for the hopes of Southerners—the rapid arrival in Kansas of a massive slave-owning population never materialised.

With the issue of slavery in Kansas about to be decided by popular sovereignty, Southerners grew rather desperate. The issue, in their minds, was simply too crucial. They gave up on the democratic system and turned to instigation and intimidation on a mass scale to get what they wanted. When the first territorial election in Kansas approached in the fall of 1854—the choosing of a territorial delegate to Congress,

Senator David Atchison, one of Stephen A. Douglass' close friends, campaigned up and down the Missouri frontier, urging Missourians to cross over into Kansas and cast ballots. In the words of a later congressional investigation, a "systematic invasion" then occurred. More than half the 2800 ballots cast in the election were fraudulent, and a pro-slavery delegate was elected.

With these events the Kansas issue took on a new character. A mass-scale-organized attack had been initiated against the nation's basic principle—majority rule. One segment of the population was seen as seeking to *impose* its will on a larger section of Americans and seize the government of an entire territory. It appeared to the predominantly industrial interests in the North that the predominantly plantation interests in the South were going to destroy the most fundamental thing of all—the rule of law, and then establish its own sovereignty over the entirety of the nation. How could any issue be more crucial? The argument over slavery had, to use the words of Robert Kelley, "broken out into an arena without boundaries; anything might happen and the first casualty would be government itself." This was why the nation became so obsessed with the Kansas issue. It was a crisis in which fundamental principles, of which slavery was only an insignificant one, were at stake.

## 4.2 THE DEBATES ON SLAVERY AND OTHER ISSUES OF NORTH-SOUTH CONFRONTATION

Any consideration of American literature around the Civil War would be incomplete without an examination of the debates on slavery and other issues of North-South confrontation.

The basic debate, as stated earlier, was the debate involving fundamental principles of the United States constitution and its issue-to-issue application. The most fundamental of the principles—the rule of law, founded upon majority opinion—was at the crux of the North-South confrontation over which of their respective cultural and economic systems would prevail during westward expansion.

As the confrontation escalated, another issue—that of secession from or belonging to the union of states—came up. Faced with consistent criticisms by the Northern whites, Southern whites were by this time torn by indecisions. They were in fact deeply loyal to the Union. They had, after all, led in its forming; had provided most of its presidents; had dominated its federal government for most of its existence; were proud of its leading role in all its wars; and were self-consciously "American."

But with the rise of the Republican party by the mid-1850s, the mood of the Southerners changed. The Republican party sought to fill in the void left by the decline of the Whig party, which had gradually lost the support of New Englanders and several other traditional American constituencies in being unable to stem the tide of "de-Americanisation" threatening to engulf the country from Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany on the one hand and Southern belligerence on the other hand.

The name "Republican" for the new party seemed to spring up naturally. The Democrats, the alternative party, it was said had fallen into the hands of slavocrats, and had lost all ties with republicanism. Indeed, Republicans said that it was now their party that was the true inheritor of the legacy of Thomas Jefferson; that it was they who believed genuinely in the principles of the United States constitution. Following upon the Kansas controversy, when Southerners tried to extend the domain of slavery into the new state, Northerners reacted almost en masse by leaving all their erstwhile hearings and joining the Republican party, which they regarded as the only true party for Jeffersonian republicanism.

How to explain the meteoric ascent of the Republican party? Its members were very seldom abolitionists, though they were very often opposed to the institution of slavery. Their opposition to slavery emanated from an urge to keep black people out of territories altogether. So they were by no means anti-racist, or even less racist than members of the Democratic party, for instance.

The key to the success of the Republicans then was not their progressive ideals, but the popular perception among millions of Americans that only the Republicans could save the American Republic. Southerners responded to this popular perception as an imposition of Northerners on them and their lifestyle.

The South lived by a code of honor, which demanded that honorable men were not meddled with. Over two centuries of Southern life, honor and slavery had become so intertwined that many simply could not conceive one could exist without the other. Out of honor came an imperious insistence upon absolute authority over others, in this case over black people. As historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has written: "White man's honor and black man's slavery became in the public mind of the South practically indistinguishable." Out of this proud prickliness could come the quick flares of violent anger so widely noted as a trait among Southern white men, for a readiness to die in defense of honor was the highest virtue. Thousands of Southerners, both male and female, saw the problem they faced vis-a-vis the Northerners and the war that followed as a simple test of their honor. They must either assert themselves against the Yankee or secede from the Union. The Northern perspective on this challenge was ironically voiced by Abraham Lincoln, a Southern president. "My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union," the President asserted to Horace Greeley, the influential abolitionist editor of the *New York Tribune*, in August 1862:

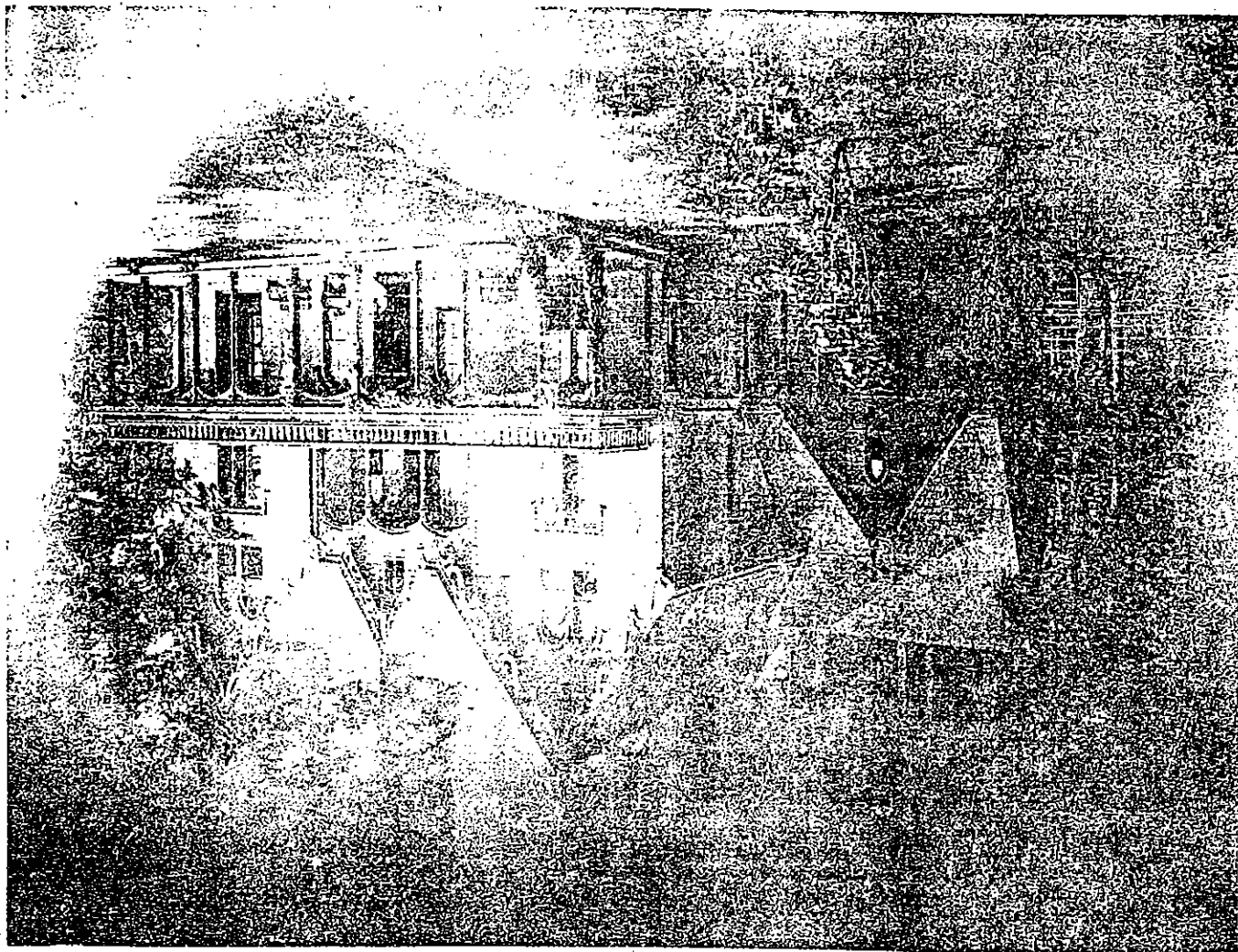
It is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do this.

Slavery, then, was in many respects, the original issue of debate in the North-South confrontation. Lincoln, who hated slavery and yet refused to concede the equality of blacks with whites, represented the central paradox in the Northern attitude to slavery. What the North wanted was to put slavery back to where the North believed the fathers of the nation had put slavery: legally protected, but kept where it was, marked out clearly as a peculiar institution to be detested by everyone, and thus placed in the course of ultimate extinction. If confined to the Southern states, slavery would eventually die, perhaps in a hundred years, and the North was willing to put up with it that long.

If the Northern attitude to slavery was articulated best by Abraham Lincoln, a Southerner, it was Stephen Douglas, a Northern senator, who most perfectly expressed the Southern view of slavery. Douglas openly proclaimed that black people were inherently inferior to whites. White people had a right to enslave blacks, and state and federal authorities had no right to meddle with this right. Douglas' opinions summed up, more or less, what the South felt about slavery.

Slavery indeed emerged as the focal issue of North-South confrontation in the senatorial election of 1858 in which Douglas, the Democratic candidate faced Lincoln, the Republican candidate. In a series of debates during the run-up to this election, Lincoln and Douglas argued out the case against and for slavery respectively, either seeking to interpret the letters of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution in his own spirit to present his position on the matter.

Photograph taken in about 1865 70 of Oakholm, first Harford home of Harrier Beecher Stowe.



### 4.3 THE PROSE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR-I

The American Civil War was all set to start.

On November 6, 1860, Abraham Lincoln fulfilled his promise by getting elected as President of the United States in a four-cornered contest. But no sooner was the election result announced that several southern states formed themselves into a confederacy and declared their intention to secede from the Union.

Stephen Douglass won the senatorial election that followed the debates. But he did so only because the electoral districts of the state of Illinois were so adjusted that more weight was given to Democratic than to Republican votes, so that the northern districts of the state (strongly Yankee) and actually secured a popular majority. His demonstrated power in the voting booth caused politicians in North as well as South to prick up their ears. Illinois had the third largest population in the Union: its electoral vote was crucial: the state could go either way, and a strong vote getter in the next presidential contest was essential to both sides.



Harriet Beecher Stowe,  
photographed in 1882

"So this is the little lady who made this war!" Lincoln said to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of two prodigiously popular novels that could be fairly said to have altered the course of the nation and created international feeling on the slavery issue. Stowe was one of the many women writers who largely dominated American popular literature, shaping general direction and particular intention. The daughter of a famed Northern Congregationalist preacher, Lyman Beecher, the wife of another minister, the sister of six more, she felt all the moral force of the abolition issue. She had never lived in the South and did not know slave life at first hand, though when she lived in Cincinnati, she had contact with many fugitive slaves fleeing North. She turned her sentimental mode of writing to the moral subject of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which first appeared as a serial in an antislavery weekly from 1815 to 1852, increased in length as interest grew, and then came out as a book in 1852. It had extraordinary impact; it sold more than 300,000 copies in the United States and a million and a half worldwide, making it one of the greatest international best-sellers ever, the best-known American novel—a book, said Emerson, that "encircled the globe." When in 1868, John William De Forest described the nation's search for "the Great American Novel," he made it a prime contender. George Eliot, Tolstoy, Henry James, all honored it, though less for its stylized art than for its moral philosophy. Stage versions increased its impact, often turning it towards minstrel humor—to which, in fact, its more comical black characters owed something. Motifs from the book—Eliza crossing the ice—or characters like Topsy ("I 'spect I just grow'd") became general folklore. Songs, poems, epigrams, stories, and plates illustrating the book appeared everywhere. Stowe followed it with the fictionalised account of a slave rebellion, *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1854), an equally interesting, if less well-known, novel. He also published, *The Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (1853) to show that she had drawn extensively on abolitionist materials and slave "narratives" for the "truth" of her story.

But like all books that change the world, the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was also problematic. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* unquestionably established black life—a white version of it—as a subject for an American fiction that had essentially neglected it. It provoked innumerable counter-versions from slave-owners—no fewer than fourteen pro-slavery versions of contented slave life appeared in fiction in the next three years alone. For black writers, however, it had more complex and longer-lasting impact, as its idioms and motifs, representations of black speech and black character, above all stereotypes of black life, shaped future fiction and popular culture. Over the



generations black writers have therefore felt compelled to work through it even to work against it. The independent representation of the black in fiction would have to wait, till the turn of the century and beyond.

Much the same could be said about the depiction of the Civil War itself. This was the largest crisis the nation had faced. It marked the fracturing of its unity; the moment of greatest change in its history. Yet none of the major writers of its generation came close to it, in either participation or picturization. Walt Whitman was not a soldier but a hospital attendant. Mark Twain kept away from the theatre of war. Henry James was kept from fighting by his "mysterious wound." William Dean Howells was a consul in Italy. Emily Dickinson was, as always, a recluse. When Edmund Wilson wrote *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1962), he was struck by the relative absence of such literature. Wars, he concluded, are no time for belles-lettres. What they produce is another kind of literary expression as in polemic, speeches, sermons, reportage, soldiers' songs and popular battle hymns and verses like "John Brown's Body," Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and Daniel Decatur Emmette's "Dixie," which tallied the combatants in the conflict. But, fortunately or unfortunately, as many of such pieces of war writing have been lost to posterity as they have survived. In any case, there is not much of distinction in the pieces that have survived.

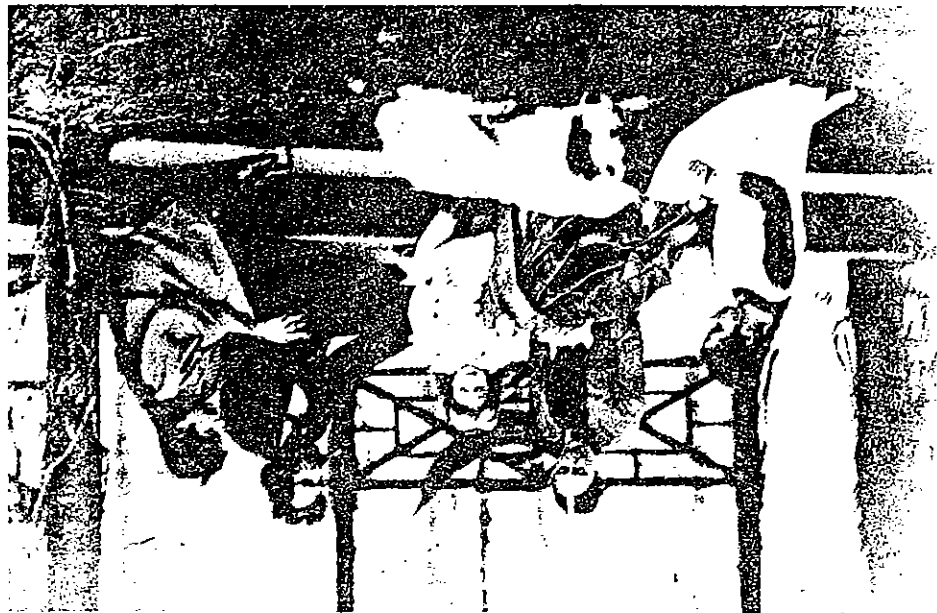
Some of the best prose written about the war was produced immediately following upon the war in the form of realist prose fiction. These included novels such as John William De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* (1879) and works by Thomas Nelson Page and George Washington Cable. De Forest, with his strong battle scenes, was the first realist to record the conflict. Ambrose Bierce's sensitive war stories came a good deal later, while arguably the greatest novel about the immediacy of the battle-field did not appear for thirty years, from a writer born six years after the conflict ended who said he reconstructed the event from the football-field—Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). The major impact of the war on Southern fiction had to wait even longer; some interesting novels appeared during the Reconstruction, but the great treatments came as late as the twentieth century, with Ellen Glasgow and William Faulkner, who found in the conflict of North and South a modern yet eternal theme.



Mark Twain

In Paris we often saw in shop windows the sign "English Spoken here," just as one sees in the windows at home the sign "Ici on parle francais." We always invaded these places at once - and invariably received the information, framed in faultless French, that the clerk who did the English for the establishment had just gone to dinner and would be back in an hour - would Monsieur buy something? He wondered why those parties happened to take their dinners at such erratic and extraordinary hours, for we never called when an exemplary Christian would be in the least likely to be abroad on such an errand. The truth was, it was a base fraud - a snare to trap the unwary - chaff to catch fledglings with. They had no English-murdering clerk.

- Mark Twain  
in *The Innocents Abroad*



Mark Twain with his wife Olivia and their children,  
(from left to right) Clara, Jean, and Susy,  
and the family dog, Hash.

## 4.4 THE PROSE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR-II

When Walt Whitman said about literary reconstruction of the American Civil War that "the real war will never get into the books," he was partly right and partly wrong. The notable changes in American prose around the Civil War came not in what was written about but in ways of writing. Few wars have been as fully recorded by direct participants in reminiscence and chronicle, as the upheaval forced language toward a new realism to undermine old myths, ideas and faiths. An old rhetoric died to be replaced by a new candour, the note of Lincoln's great orations. The war destroyed two social orders: Southern petty feudalism and Northern small capitalism. What replaced them was a modern, corporate-business-oriented, imperialist nation-state. When reconstruction began, the dominant voices stressed the need for reconciliation and recuperation, for a return to the gospel of national expansion and enrichment. Walt Whitman, who came closest to writing the American epic, recorded the horror of suffering and death in his war poetry, but his essential theme, especially in his prose, was to be reconciliation.

But now, ah now, to learn from the crisis of anguish,  
Advancing, grappling with direct fate and recolling not,  
And now to conceive and show to the world what your children  
emmasse really are . . .

"During the secession war I was with the armies, and saw the rank and file, North and South, and studied them for four years," he wrote in 1881, "I have never had the least doubt about the country in its essential future since." In *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, John William De Forest follows the course indicated by his title; the book moves from realistic reporting of war time incidents toward "a grand, re-united, triumphant Republic." Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* is a bitterly critical record of war and its ravages by a war veteran. Both Thomas Nelson Page and George Washington Cable began by writing about war but then eventually turned to romance. Indeed, with the advent of modernity into America, the memory of the old, pre-modern, era evoked a nostalgia which many writers cherished. "Make [your Southern heroine] fall in love with a Federal officer and your story will be printed at once," advised novelist Thomas Nelson Page.

In a time for healing, the idea of national progress was a panacea. Westward expansion diverted attention from the conflict of North and South to the ever-enlarging new lands that were prompting vast population movement. Before the war, Walt Whitman's open-ended verse had celebrated the transcendental self. After the war, it celebrated the transcontinental self, ever-exploding and passing to newer and newer territories, to India and beyond. This aggressive self was also an acquisitive self, which sought to appropriate for itself every instrument of power and prosperity. Gradually, these two selves began to divide by projecting two different visions of the United States—one, a United States of extending boundaries, and the other, a United States of boundless excess. In 1869, when a golden spike was driven at Promontory Point, Utah, to mark the completion of the railroad connecting the two coasts, it seemed a celebration of expanding space. But it was simultaneously a celebration of the commercial and technological engines driving America forward that would draw that space into a vast modernizing process which made America, by the century's end, the world's leading industrial nation.

#### 4.5 LEFT US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have focused upon significant prose written around the Civil War period of American history. These include the published and unpublished debates between North and South on different issues such as constitutional principles, secession from or belonging to the union of states on the part of individual states, and slavery, the 'original sin.'

Also discussed in this Unit are some of the key texts ('white' texts) emanating out of the slavery issue and the Civil War—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, John William De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. The above-mentioned texts are all works of prose-fiction, as against non-fictional prose, which though produced in substantial terms in the shape of polemic speeches, sermons and reportage, was not always of as impressive a literary quality as that of fictional prose.

The Unit ends with an analysis of the altered style which, much more than the altered subject-matter was the most salient feature of the prose of the American Civil War.

#### 4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Sum up some of the debates between the Northern states and the Southern states on issues, which in due course instigated the American Civil War.
2. "The American Civil War did not inspire many great works of literature in the currency of its occurrence." Would you agree with this statement. Give reasons for your views.
3. "The notable changes in American prose around the Civil War came not in what was written about but in ways of writing." Comment.

#### 4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Post-Modernism: A History of American Literature*, 1991.

Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, 1962.

Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*, 1973.

## UNIT 5 AMERICAN PROSE IN THE POST-CIVIL WAR PERIOD, 1865-1890

### Structure

5.0	Objectives
5.1	The Context of American Prose in the post-Civil War Period, 1865-1890
5.2	The Prose of Samuel Longhorne Clemens and William Dean Howells.
5.3	The Prose of Henry James and Edith Wharton
5.4	The Prose of some 'other' late nineteenth century American writers
5.5	Let Us Sum Up
5.6	Glossary
5.7	Questions
5.8	Suggested Readings

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit will be to indicate the different and diverse strains of prose in America in the post-Civil War period, 1865-1890, with special reference to qualitative variations between this prose and the prose in America in the pre-Civil War period, the period of the so-called American Renaissance.

### 5.1 THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN PROSE IN THE POST-CIVIL WAR PERIOD, 1865-1890

The twenty-five years between the end of the Civil War and the 1890s, were the period of the most profound changes America had ever seen. This was, as literary historians Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury have remarked, America's Victorian period, celebrated in a series of great exhibitions like the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851 to proclaim the technological and the industrial age. In 1876, a hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, the Centennial Exhibition held in Philadelphia put American mechanical achievements on display, a mass of wondrous machines such as Thomas A. Edison's telegraph and Alexander G. Bell's telephone. The spread of new land in the West was matched by transformation of land into capital, the massive increase in the scale of immigration by increased mobility of national population, the emergence of fresh industries by the amassing of huge personal fortunes, a new kind of wealth and power. In 1893 came the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the dynamic city that tied West and East into a single, interlinked, modern economic and social system. The historian Henry Adams, scion of one of the oldest American families, already feeling himself displaced by the new centers of wealth and power, visited the massive display housed in over four hundred buildings. With the hum of machinery in his ears, Adams recognized the proliferating activities and "energies quite new" that expressed the expanding capitalism destined to displace abstract thought and all liberal disciplines of study. The old agrarian society had been replaced once and for all, by a new industrial society, a unified process—but also a complex one extending beyond traditional intellectual comprehension.

The traditionalists' predicament had been predicted already in the writings of American Romanticism, even though in this new America many pre-war authors and works were to be forgotten. Emerson and Thoreau had constructed their "nature" and their idea of the transcendental self in part as a critique of a world devoted only to

material systems. Melville and Hawthorne posited a fundamental conflict between this materialistic society and a mythicized community, between the real and the imaginary; both perceived the changes in consciousness that would be required to cope with a rapidly changing milieu. Like the transcendentalists, the writers of the American "romance" did not fail to perceive the direction of American development; in fact, they saw more deeply into its implications than their successors. Yet the sense of national change was so great that in a few years their work seemed quite irrelevant.

The preoccupation of the post-war American authors and works was, in the words of the critic Edmund Clarence Stedman, "to depict life as it is, though rarely as yet in its intenser phases." John William De Forest had set the tone in a manifesto-essay of 1868 titled "The Great American Novel." De Forest called for a novel that would provide a "picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence," a picture, he said, never yet fully drawn. "The Great American Novel" must avoid the "subjective" spirit of the American romances ("only a vague consciousness of this life") and the expatriate withdrawal of the writer who "neglected the trial of sketching American life and fled abroad for his subjects." And though he admitted America was still a "nation of provinces," regional or cameo writing would not really serve, either. The need was for a novel of close empirical detail and broad social significance. In this, De Forest was urging the claims of the new realism that was already finding expression in the books of writers like Samuel Langhorne Clemens and William Dean Howells who in different fashions were to draw the developing realistic methods of Europe into American fiction. Realism of subject-matter had become a dominant characteristic of the European novel from before the mid-nineteenth century. Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers in France urged the need to open literature to a full range of realistic social concerns; the English novelist George Eliot in *Adam Bede* (1859) argued the importance for fiction of "all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life." These and other authors, like the Russians, Turgenev and Tolstoy, pointed out the way for the new American writers too, for as William Dean Howells declared after acknowledging the importance of European developments, realism was characteristically democratic and therefore implicitly American, an art of the dramas of ordinary existence and the "life of small things." In the United States it could be an expression of optimism and even of idealism, for it was, Howells said, about "the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American." Taking what was familiar and local in American experience, the methods of realism could create a democratic universal. The new realism was particularly relevant for the novel, the most realistic of all literary forms. The older lineage of romance did not die, but in a materialistic time it became displaced toward popular fantasy; it was realism in its various languages that became the exploring and innovative discourse of the new American writing.

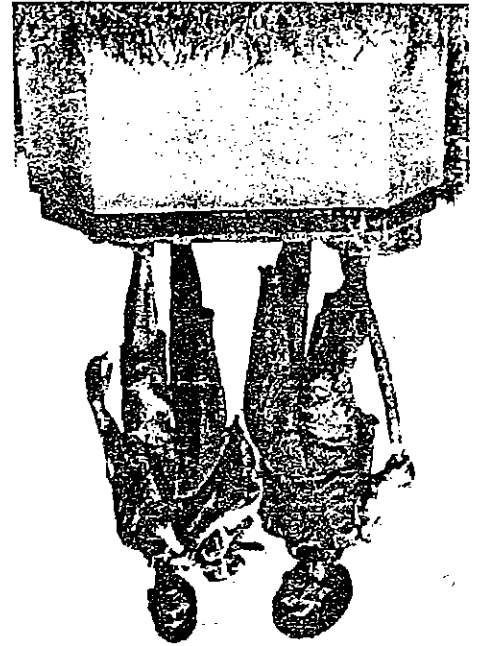
## 5.2 THE PROSE OF SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS AND WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

No writer sought to give voice to the conflicting directions and directives of American culture in the post-Civil War period more fully than the writer who took to himself the humorist's name of "Mark Twain." Samuel Langhorne Clemens had begun his literary career by going West, lighting out for the territory like his most famous hero, Huckleberry Finn. During the war he had divided his sympathies, siding with his native South in the beginning, but afterwards moving with the alien North. Finally, however, he fixed his sights on the West. His instincts were entrepreneurial; his father was a speculator always dreaming of a fortune. Samuel had grown up in Hannibal, on the Mississippi riverbank, at a time when the river was still the nation's great north-south turnpike, the crossroads of slavery and abolition, a gathering place for Western passages. This pre-war Mississippi Valley life was to become his best maternal and acquire a pristine innocence, but it was always charged with the nation's

In 1867, already an established writer, he left New York with a group of pious Easterners drawn by the "tide of a great popular movement" on an extensive steamship tour to Europe and beyond. Americans were looking with new veneration toward more settled cultures. Travel facilities were improving, passages growing more quick, and many could afford to look at, and collect, art. Tain's comic report on the voyage, *Innocents Abroad* (1869), mocks not so much European culture and customs

lost the memory of a more innocent era. was a journey into the deepest changes of his own contemporary culture, but he never come to depended increasingly on wage slavery. Tain's eastward voyage in 1866 the pre-war world he knew was based on chattel slavery, the post-war world he would following the war. The pre-war world was agrarian, the post-war world industrial; to his writing was to come directly from the rapidly changing context of America and the rural Mississippi Valley of the period before the war, but the primary impetus name the Gilded Age. His subject-matter was always to lie in the world of the West tradition of his early work with the social spirit of the decades he himself helped post-war American writing as he undertook to link the local-color and Western Tain's relocation signaled the start of his remarkable synthesis of the elements of East, being drawn, he said, by "a call" to literature, of a low order i.e. humorous." (1865), gained him a national reputation, and so in 1866 he decided to move to the West. A Western tall tale, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" moved on to San Francisco, the work of Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller, writers of humor. But there are also "Artemus Ward" and "John Billings," and then, when he Longstreet, whose *Georgia Scenes* (1835) lay behind much contemporary dialect His early writing owed much to the tell-tale tradition of Augustus Baldwin

Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer in Hannibal, The Statue stands at the foot of Cardiff Hill, about half a block from the site of the home of Tom Blankenship, the model for Huck Finn



I set still and listened,  
Directly I could just barely  
hear a "me-yow! Me yow!"  
down there. That was good!  
Says I, "me-yow! Me-yow!"  
put out the light and  
scrambled out of the  
window onto the shed. Then  
I slipped down to the  
ground and crawled in  
amongst the trees, and sure  
enough there was Tom  
Sawyer waiting for me.  
- Mark Twain  
in *Huckleberry Finn*

tensions. His first instinct was to live on the river, and, as he was to explain in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), he followed this instinct to the point of becoming, in 1859, a licensed steamboat pilot. But he had also worked as a printer's apprentice on the local newspaper that was edited by his brother Orion, and when he went West it was as much a journalist as a prospector. He did prospect in Nevada but joined the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*, where he began to draw on the local humor tradition and adopted a humorist's pseudonym from the river life he had left behind him.

("When I had seen one of these martyrs I had seen them all," he wrote, summing up the Old Masters in a famous phrase) as innocent American veneration of them. But Twain was an innocent himself, his difference from his fellow passengers was that he could offer the clarity of skepticism while believing in a "splendour of gay immortality" they did not share. Innocence thus became a form of realism, a perspective that could be used to represent America as much as Europe. After the great success of *Innocents Abroad*, Twain wrote *Roughing It* (1872). But it was what came next, the articles of "Old Times on the Mississippi" (eventually *Life on the Mississippi*), that staked out his essential resources—Mississippi Valley life in its heyday before the war. In one sense this was idealized, picturesque subject matter, and he partly treated it as such. But he also offered a new realism: the river was not just a landscape but a workplace, a troubled one, with deicits and dangers he had plumbed himself in his training as a river boat pilot."

Twain was writing of the past, but his career was becoming one of the great success stories of American letters. He became an energetic Eastern businessman, promoting his product through the new market in subscription sales and as a powerful stage performer. He married into a wealthy coal-owning family and moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he became rich and famous, though he was cynical about both his fame and his riches. An entrepreneurial go-getter, he tuned in effortlessly to the shifting history of his age, which he recorded in his first novel, *The Gilded Age* (1873), written in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner. The book confronted the present, looking at the period 1860-68 as one which

uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations.

A deeply revealing book, it portrays the age as a great gold rush where country and city alike are packed with fortune hunters, exemplified by the figure of the confidence man Colonel Sellers. But Captain Sellers was in part Mark Twain himself, the writer as capitalist promoter seeking to conquer the literary marketplace.

Thus Twain the castigatior of American society was also its celebrator. Never quite sure whether to commend or condemn, Twain developed two warning voices, that of the humorist and that of the satirist, respectively exemplified in his two best-known novels, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Both Tom and Huck are "bad boys" of American genteel culture which their creator knew only too well. But while Tom's "adventures" are childishly innocent and ultimately conform to the ground rules of this culture, Huck's "adventures" are experientially adult and ultimately challenge the ground rules of this culture. *Huckleberry Finn* thus turns out to be a boy's book that is far more than a Boy's Book, the book with which, said Ernest Hemmingway, in his famous compliment to Mark Twain, American literature really starts. Huck's colloquial language, for one thing, once and for all, extends the frontiers of the language of literature in America, taking it beyond the limits of polite language. For another thing, the representation of Jim as not merely a stereotyped "nigger" but as a multi-dimensional human being introduces a radical innovation in the American novelist's treatment of race and race relations in American society. But more than anything else, it is Huck's and Jim's repudiation of "civilisation" embodied in their journey together down the river that takes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* into regions where American prose-writers had never treaded before.

By now Twain was America's leading writer: "the Lincoln of our literature," said William Dean Howells, Mark Twain's friend and junior fellow-writer. Certainly Twain expressed his age and its changes, not only in social conditions but in belief. Reflecting on Twain's career in 1901, Howells saw him as the Westerner who had been forced to confront as well as to contest a world in which the natural and the provincial had been made obsolete.

The inventions, the appliances, the improvements of the modern world invaded the hoary old of his rivers and forests and prairies, and while he was still a pioneer, a hunter, a trapper, he found himself confronted with the financier, the scholar, the gentleman. . . . They set him to thinking, and, as he was never afraid of anything, he thought over the whole field and demanded explanations of all his prepossessions—of equality, of humanity, of representative government, and revealed religion. When they had not their answers ready, without accepting the conventions of the modern world as solutions or in any manner final, he laughed again. . . . Such, or somewhat like this was the genesis and evolution of Mark Twain.

Howell's portrait of Twain as a regionalist from the American past challenging the transformations of the present suggests one reason why these two men, the most well-known writers of their era, became such close friends. For Howell was a believer in the novel—the novel as a serious form of social attention, not a species of romance. His argument for fiction's centrality dominated literary debate in the so-called Gilded Age—for his voice sounded from the editorial chair of the authoritative *Atlantic Monthly*—and his views had much to do with the fact that from the Civil War to the century's end, it was the novel and not the poem that was the central expressive form. "The art of fiction has in fact become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens or Thackeray." By "finer art" Howell meant a more precise and detailed art, an art responsive to social necessity. For Howell insisted that America was no longer to be written about as eternal myth, a romance, but as time-bound history that required the scientific understanding of the novel.

William Dean Howells was a Midwesterner from Martin's Ferry, Ohio, and grew up, like Twain, in an atmosphere of printing and publishing. A campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln provided him with funds for a trip to Boston, where he met some notable literary figures. He was also appointed American consul in Venice, where he spent the crucial years of 1861-65, thereby missing the Civil War. Europe tempted him, and his first novels are set there. But he steadfastly rejected the rising fashion for what he called "literary absenteeism" and insisted instead on dealing with the immediate subject-matter of contemporary American change. Back in Boston, he joined the *Atlantic Monthly*; by 1871 he was its editor and influential tone-setter, the Dean of American Letters. Supportive to his contemporaries, he administered critical reputations, became the temperate voice of literary change and set out to balance New England's "idealizing" tendency with the "realistic" inclination of the West. Realism—the "only literary movement of our times that seems to have vitality in it"—became both his cause and the method of his own writing. Romance, he granted, had worked to escape the dead weight of tradition and widen the bonds of sympathy, but it was now exhausted. It remained for realism "to assert that fidelity of experience and probability of motive that are the essential conditions of a great imaginative literature. It is not a new theory, but it has never before universally characterized literary endeavour."

Howells' own technique of writing was spoken of as "photographic;" Henry Adams began the metaphor in an admiring review of *Their Wedding Journey* (1872). His first novel, it is a work of common American life done, like so many American novels, in the simple form of the travelogue as we follow a honeymoon couple to their classic, picturesque destination, Niagara Falls. Plot, he said, "was the last thing for which I care;" his stories developed through vignette and a luminous vigor of the commonplace. Howells had the good novelist's gift for selecting just those elements in a situation which bring it home and suggest forthright veracity.

Many of Howells' novels—he produced something like a novel a year, of varied quality—are slight, but he is perhaps the most undervalued of nineteenth century



American writers. His two best works, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), is about the America of his times. Lapham, the protagonist of the first novel, show-cases a rags-to-riches career through his successful paint business. But when he returns after the Civil War, he discovers that the older era of business is over. "The day of small things was past" in an era of new commerce. In trying to survive in this new era he overextends and is drawn into speculative dealings. The image for this is the big house he builds in Boston. The house burns down and he instinctively renounces his speculation, finding that it has threatened his domestic life. His financial fall is his moral rise; he is taken back into the world of small things—the heartland of Howell's fiction. In the second novel, Howell explores his own decision to leave Boston, the world of small things for New York City. New York in this troubled novel is seen as a city of social mobility and social tension. His portrait of the capitalist, Jacob Dryfoos, presents a man who no longer possesses ethical inner guidance but functions according to the "lawless, godless" rules of social Darwinism. His central character, Basil March, acknowledges the "economic chance—world we have created" where men struggle bloodily, "lying, cheating, stealing."

Society was no longer a bright moral stage where life is illumined by its own virtuous center; it demanded a fresh kind of novel and a more sociological vision to grasp it. In the essays of *Criticism and Fiction* (1898), Howells restated his realist credo:

We must ask ourselves before anything else, is this true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry—this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak; and without it all graces of style and feasts of invention and cunning of construction are so many superfluities of naughtiness.

It was a credo which lent support to the up-and-coming naturalist generation that did not in any way romanticize the life of the oppressed under-classes, the social struggles and harsh realities of a contemporary America—a generation that included Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser.

### 5.3 THE PROSE OF HENRY JAMES AND EDITH WHARTON

Like Samuel Langhorne Clemens and William Dean Howells, Henry James was conscious of growing up in an America undergoing enormous and fundamental changes. He was raised in New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts, but in a very special enclave of it: the James family, almost a country in its own right. Henry James, Sr., his father, was a man of means, and a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson who adopted the tradition of transcendentalist idealism and once said he preferred spiritual to natural existence. The father had regularly taken his children to Europe for their "senuous education," and that "senuousness," the hunger to apprehend hunger through consciousness, remained with the son throughout his life. He was kept out of the Civil War through an "obscure hurt" sustained while fighting a fire. He studied law at Harvard, but then turned to writing; his first tales appeared in the Boston magazines as the war ended. He sought to establish himself, as did most American writers, with the travel piece, writing of America but also of England, France and Italy, the three essential European parishes of the novels that would follow. He visited Europe between 1869 and 1870 and from 1872 to 1874, returning each time to "do New York" but steadily opening up the eastward map which he felt was as central to the American heritage as was the west.

It was, in short, the most strategic location for one whose essential posture was that of observer and spectator and whose conviction was that art arose from the texture of the culture on which it drew. James was soon assuring Howells that it was on "manners, customs, usages, habits, forms" that the novelist lived, that it took complex social machinery to set the novel into motion, that America was too divided between the concrete and the abstract. Howells disagreed: it was the American want of such things that made the opportunity of his writers so interesting. Precisely this question

on the whole most possible form of life. I take it as an artist and a bachelor, as one who has the passion of observation and whose business is the study of human life. It is the biggest aggregation of human life—the most complete compendium of the world.

Babylon," as Old World—my choice, my need, my life." He selected London, his "murky London, and at the end of the year decided to settle there for good. "My choice is the honesty while gradually coming to distrust their aestheticism. He moved on to Goncourt brothers, Maupassant, Zola, Turgenyev, admiring their fierce literary year he was back in Paris with the leading novelists of his age, Flaubert, Daudet, the advent of modernity in America when James made what he called his "choice." That The Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was in progress, proudly announcing the

with the experience of Europe. *Hudson* (1876), is the story of an American sculptor's need to temper his innocence essential themes of his later works. His first novel published as a book, *Roderick* the apt title *The Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales*, tales that lay down many of the In 1875 he collected his travel pieces as *Iransatlantic Sketches* and his tales under



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Period

haunted James thereafter. Nonetheless, with many doubts about "giving up," he began the expatriation that would last his lifetime. So began, too, his full commitment to the "international theme" that would dominate most of his subsequent work and which he would take to ever more elaborate levels of complexity and cultivation.

James' choice was not a repudiation of his American heritage—indeed he saw himself claiming that heritage as a right to cosmopolitanism, for he was, he recognized, "more of a cosmopolitan (thanks to the combination of the continent and the U.S.A. which has formed my lot) than the average Briton of culture." As he wrote in 1888 to his brother William James, the psychologist and philosopher of American pragmatism whose thought was greatly to influence him,

I aspire to write in such a way that it would be impossible from the outside to say whether I am at a given moment an American writing about England or an Englishman writing about America (dealing as I do with both countries), and so far from being ashamed of such an ambiguity I should be exceedingly proud of it, for it would be highly civilized.

For Henry James the essential principle of fiction was contrast, and no contrast was greater than that encountered "when we turn back and forth between the distinctively American and the distinctively European outlook."

But at the heart of James' fiction was a probing into what lay beyond this contrast, a quest for a self which was prior to social circumstance and conditioning. This quest is represented in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the story of Isabel Archer of Albany, New York, the free young girl, determined "to see, to try, to know." Set in motion through three European countries—England, France and Italy—she endures an emblem of hope until the money that is to set her free becomes her downfall. Entrapped by two scheming American expatriates, who hoodwink her into a marriage with an eye towards her huge inherited wealth, she finds herself "ground in the very mill of the conventional." Yet, though Isabel must ultimately face the fact that there is more to life than the Emersonian self, James preserves her as a transcendent character in her determination to live through the consequences of her own search for independence. The freedom she experiences now is freedom as in the recognition of necessity, a much truncated version of his earlier aspiration to becoming an absolutely free spirit. It is the stance, curiously, which seems to engage her more than the spirit, of freedom, and it is of the stance that James draws his "portrait." James was, by this time, increasingly interested in the "art" of fiction rather than its "realism."

For him as for T. Wain and Howells, the early 1890s were a bleak period, when, as his brother William said, the world seemed to enter a "moral universe" of growing fissure between the artistic subjectivity and the objective reality. But like the best writers of the 1890s, James responded to the sense of crisis with a new aesthetic, deliberately at odds with the rising popular audience whose expectations seemed to limit the novel. His new methods were apparent in *What Maisie Knew* (1897), a work of impressionist psychology. As the title suggests, it is a fable set in the mind—the "small expanding consciousness" of the young girl Maisie, with its "register of impressions" as she seeks to understand what is happening in the adult (which is also the adulterous) world around her. Similar sexual secrets are also hidden in the labyrinths of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), but here the ghost-story genre obscured the obscurities and made this one of his most popular late works.

Most of the late novels are about "cracks in things"—as in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), where the international theme is recast—it is now not so much the contestation as the congruence of Europe and America that concerns him, and the congruence reveals a mingling of the aesthetic and the commercial and of the contemplative and the acquisitive. The central symbol of the flawed bowl suggests not only social

confusion but the inevitable incompleteness of art itself. These books capture a heightened sense of the disorder of modern European society, a new awareness of imperfections in the sought object and an admission of the incompleteness of the subjective seeker.

Europe, he said, "had ceased to be romantic to me;" a visit to America in 1904 showed him there too a crass capitalist context without romance. His *The American Scene* (1907), displays the massed mechanistic mindset of a people outrunning comprehension, yet charged with a magnificent motivation. When the First World War came, he expressed his sense of the rising unreality of reality to Hugh Walpole: "Reality is a world that was to be capable of this." In his writer's quarrel with the direction of modern-day history, however, Henry James was certainly not alone.

The beaufort house was one that New Yorkers were proud to show to foreigners, especially on the night of the annual ball. The Beauforts had been among the first people in New York to own their own red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen, under their own awning, instead of biring it with the supper and the ball-room chairs. They had also inaugurated the custom of letting the ladies take their cloaks off in the hall, instead of shuffling up to the hostess's bedroom and recurring their hair with the aid of the gasburner. Beaufort was understood to have said that he supposed all his wife's friends had maids who saw they left home.

- Edith Wharton,  
in *The Age of Innocence*

A writer-friend who virtually emulated the manner of Henry James' movement away from American to Europe and then to a civilizational horizon was Edith Wharton. There were those who read her work as being essentially Jamesian, and she certainly shared his sense of the cultivated American mind being driven steadily into ironic detachment—this is the theme of her late backward glance over American society at the turn of the century in which she had grown up, *The Age of Innocence* (1920). But her social knowledge is far more precise than James', and her sense of imprisonment by the social and the limits on self-expression greater. She shared his finesse but had a gender perspective all her own.

Wharton's novels portray social existence doubly, in terms of pathos as well as ridicule. In her most quintessential book, *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Barth comes to know herself as "the victim of the civilization which has produced her," the "highly specialized product" of a society that needs specimens of beauty, delicacy and fineness for economic exhibition. Lily is a woman of some moral scruples. Thus, there is tragic-comic irony in her discovery that behind the world of morality are rules of sexual trade:

It certainly simplified life to view it as a perpetual adjustment, a play of party politics, in which every concession had its recognized equivalent; Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures.

Arrayed against the promises of culture are the naturalistic consequences of economic determination; the conflict leads to Lily's death. The underlying naturalist assumptions are even clearer in *Ethan Frome* (1911), the story of a New England

*The Awakening*—dismissed in its day as "gilded dirt," rightly praised now as "the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman"—is a reminder that 1890s writing is often a transitional writing that allows the unexpressed to express itself and permits hitherto unheard voices to be heard as literary discourse. The immigrant and Jewish-American novel introduced itself. Abraham Cahán published his story of a Russian-Jewish immigrant who becomes a sewing-machine operator in the harsh city. *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), and opened a new tradition. Now, too, black experience began to find articulation in literature. Up to the 1890s, the most powerful writing by blacks had taken the form of slave narratives—above all the majestic *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)—or like the art of the American Indian, found expression in oral folk forms. Those who had written—Phyllis Wheatley, William Wells Brown, Harriet E. Wilson and others—had found it hard to break the impress of white convention. The author who, more than any other, managed to chart out fresh ground in black writing and even anticipate future achievements, was Charles W. Chestnut. Chestnut's stories in *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth* (both 1899) and novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), dealing with political violence against blacks, made him the first important black fictionalist. In his writings, the grief of slave life are left behind as they begin to explore the contemporary tensions of the "new Negro" in white society. Thus they lead the way into the debates about the way to black liberation that would develop between Booker T. Washington's remarkable memoir *Up from Slavery* (1901) and the more militant remarks in W. E. B. DuBois's

Taking up some of the motifs of *The Custom of the Country* is another novel by another woman writer in the decade earlier, *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin. *The Awakening* is a book where Chopin confidently displayed herself as far more than the local colorist of Creole and Cajun life she had so far seemed to be. Though a vivid evocation of New Orleans life, *The Awakening* is also the disturbing story of Edna Pontellier, six years married to a wealthy businessman who lives solely for "getting on and keeping up with the procession." She is discontented with the life of money, dresses, furnishings, her status as her husband's valuable possession, and she leaves his home. She recognizes her love for Robert, with whom she has an innocent friendship, succumbs to the attentions of Arobin, but then decides that there is no way to fill the emptiness in her life and so ends it by surrendering to the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The gulf sounds throughout the story, with its murmur "like a loving but imperative entreaty," as it "invites the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude, to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation." Her first "awakening" comes when Robert teaches her to swim in its waters; the sexual implication of this led to contemporary disapproval and later feminist interest in the book. Nevertheless, though this is certainly a tale of women's changing self-perception vis-à-vis her role in marriage and society, Edna's story has resonance which go beyond the issues of women's emancipation only. In resolving "never again to belong to another than herself" and casting off "that fictitious self with which we appear before the world," Edna, like several protagonists of Henry James' and Edith Wharton's fiction, confronts the wider ambiguities of Emersonian self-discovery.

## 5.4 THE PROSE OF SOME 'OTHER' LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN WRITERS

farmer who is kept in emotional and physical bondage after he had sought to escape a loveless marriage. But it was social imprisonment in the world of commerce that finally interested Wharton, and in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), tragedy goes hand in hand with comedy. The "custom" is divorce, the fashion of the age, which Undine Spragg, who has no moral compunctions, uses for her social promotion. In her, Wharton creates a character who is both exploited and exploiter, the emblem of a soulless social environment.

multi-genre book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and continue into the so-called Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

American Prose:  
Post-Civil War  
Period

## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have addressed ourselves to American prose in the post-Civil War period, 1865-1890. The "realistic" tenor of this prose is set off against the "romantic" note in the prose-writing of the pre-Civil War period of American history. While the prose of Samuel Longhorne Clemens and William Dean Howells is taken to exemplify this turn towards a "lifelike" literature, in style as much as in substance, the prose of Henry James and Edith Wharton is used to represent a reaction against the "naturalistic" tendencies within a lifelike literature.

The Unit ends with a brief discussion of emerging "other" voices—of women, Jewish-Americans and American blacks—amongst the multitude of speakers inhabiting the world of American literature.

## 5.6 GLOSSARY

Realism:

A mode of artistic/literary representation which endeavours to give primary to notions to verisimilitude to the reality/realities represented.

Naturalist Cosmopolitanism:

The tendency towards focusing on city and city life as objects of representation in the works of some of the late nineteenth century naturalist writers of the United States of America.

Darwinism:

Philosophy derived from the work of Charles Darwin which emphasized the notion of the evolution of the human species from "lower" order of life as well as the theory that in the evolutionary process, between as well as among species, only the fittest (in terms of environmental accommodation) would survive.

## 5.7 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on some of the shifts in style and substance in American prose written after the American Civil War as compared to American prose written before the American Civil War?
2. In what ways do the prose written by Samuel Longhorne Clemens and William Dean Howells exemplify the shift towards realism in American prose written after the American Civil War?
3. In what ways do the prose written by Henry James and Edith Wharton particularly resist the general spirit of realism in American prose written after the American Civil War?
4. Comment on the multicultural character of American prose written at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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**5.8 SUGGESTED READINGS**

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- Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, 1991.
- Jack Lane and Maurice Sullivan. *A Twentieth Century American Reader* Vols. 1900-1945, 1999.

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## AMERICAN POETRY-I



Block





## BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In Block 1 of this course we read how the Puritans arrived in New England as immigrants in exile from the Old World that was full of sin and corruption. They also had a dream to set up a Puritan utopia in the New World based on piety, virtue and absolute devotion to God, a stern God who inflicted punishment on sinners and evil-doors. They were fond of prose and sermons and also maintained journals and diaries in order to examine their own self. While they regarded prose as an instrument of utility, they looked upon poetry as a kind of illusion based on pure fancy and speculation. Prose could be of help in the pursuit of piety, virtue and devotion to God but poetry was a definite handicap in the pursuit of good life.

Still, it is a miracle of history that there were poets even in colonial New England. There was Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) who was born in Northampton, England and after her marriage migrated to Massachusetts Bay in New England.

Her poems were published in England in 1650 with the help of a relative. The second edition of her poems was published in Boston in 1687 under the title Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning. Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705) was the second poet of New England. He too was born in England and migrated to New Haven at an early age. He graduated from Harvard and also taught there for three years. It was in 1662 that his most famous poem The Day of Doom was published. It was steeped in the Puritan dogma of sin and redemption and portrayed God as a stern, unforgiving God. There is no wonder that the poem was widely read in New England.

It was Edward Taylor (1645-1729) who was, perhaps, the greatest poet of colonial America. He too was born in Leicestershire, England in a family of dissenters. He migrated to Boston in 1668. He too graduated from Harvard in 1671 and became a pastor. He was famous as a preacher but his poems were not published in his lifetime. It is a strange twist of history that his poems were published in 1939- two hundred and ten years after his death. Of all the poets of colonial America, it was Edward Taylor who carried the stamp of the English metaphysical poets like Donne, Crashaw and Herbert. There is no wonder that the colonial poets of America, being in exile from the old world, were still deeply indebted to the literature of the old world.

The second generation of poets in nineteenth century New England was born in the New World but in spite of that they always looked towards the Old World for inspiration and recognition. This generation of poets has also been described as American Romantics and in his love of nature and simplicity of diction he was often compared to William Wordsworth. He was also along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) the most popular poet of his time. If Bryant and Longfellow represented the benign and sentimental aspects of American Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Herman Melville (1819-1891) represented the morbid and gloomy aspects of American Romanticism. While Bryant and Longfellow became extremely popular poets in nineteenth century America, Poe and Melville became virtually unknown and unhonoured as poets.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the most seminal of his time and though his most profound thought was expressed in his prose, even his poetry the stamp of his Transcendentalism, that is belief in a personal, benign God, Emerson who had met Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle and interacted with him as an equal. Among other poets of the generation, mention may be made of John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), James Russell Lowell (1819-1891). The voices of the Black people were represented by George Moses Horton (1797-1883), James M. Whitfield (1823-1878) and Frances Watkins Harper (1825-1911). With the exception of Ralph Waldo Emerson these

voices could only be described as minor voices. They never could attain a full-throated, vibrated articulation through words.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is, perhaps, the most authentic voice in nineteenth century American poetry. He was born in Long Island but his youth was spent in Brooklyn, New York. He worked as a journalist and was also fond of plays and opera. He didn't have much formal schooling but his real education was conducted through his contact with carpenters, cab drivers, blacksmiths and other sundry workers. As a result he developed a passionate attachment to artisans and workers and there was nothing genteel and upper class about him. There is no wonder that slang is found in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) along with journalistic realism in depicting the life of the common people. One can safely affirm that the universality of Walt Whitman is rooted in his intense immersion in the life of the common people of America.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was a lady born in a genteel family in Amherst, New England. She was a single woman who withdrew from the local community and lived largely in the world of books, imagination and dreams. She had a number of literary mentors but, by and large, they were too conservative and conventional to realize the full implication of her modern introspective poetry.

The structure of this Block is as follows. The first unit examines briefly the life and time of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. The second unit gives you an idea of some of the major poems of Walt Whitman. The third unit makes you aware of some of the major poems of Emily Dickinson. The fourth unit is concerned with the structure of the poetry of both these major poets and brings out the subversive nature of their poetry. The fifth unit gives you some idea of the nineteenth century, modern and contemporary response to two of the most authentic poets of American literature. We do hope you will read the poems of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson with an open mind.

# UNIT 1 BACKGROUND

## Structure

1.0	Objectives
1.1	Introduction
1.2	Whitman's Life and Works
1.3	Dickinson's Life and Works
1.4	Let Us Sum Up
1.5	Chronology
1.6	Questions
1.7	Suggested Reading

## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of the background, both historical and literary that shaped Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as major voices of nineteenth century American poetry.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

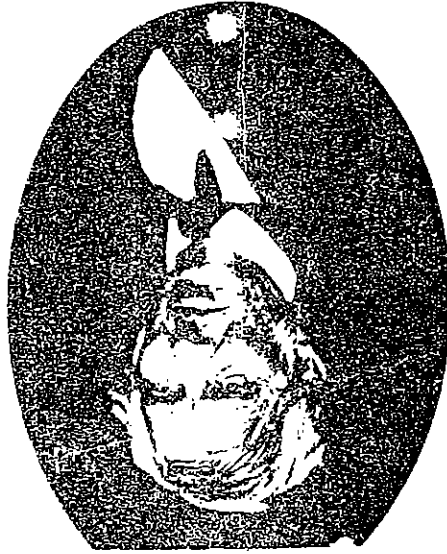
Helen McNeil has said in her excellent study, *Emily Dickinson*, "If Walt Whitman is the American poet of wholeness, Emily Dickinson is the American poet of what is broken and absent". There is no wonder that Whitman is preoccupied with the larger issues of liberty, equality, and fraternity in mid-nineteenth century America in which the Civil War (1861-65) posed a grave threat to the unity and cohesion of the nation. The Civil War ended in the victory of the northern states of the nation and defeat of the southern states. The passion aroused by the Civil War led to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the eighteenth President of the Union. It is appropriate that "When Liacs Last In The Door-Yard Bloomed" (1865-66) is one of the most moving poems ever written by Whitman. It is a passionate elegy in which the poet has described the journey of Lincoln's coffin across the length and breadth of the nation. One can safely say that Whitman is a poet of American democracy and along with liberty and equality it was fraternity, the ideal of human brotherhood that emerges as the core of his poetry.

Emily Dickinson is, however, preoccupied with the plight of the individual, particularly a woman brought up in Puritanism-dominated New England. Her poems are fragments that illumine the dark corners of a female who led a rather secluded life and there is no wonder that out of 1775 poems that are included in her definitive edition edited by Thomas H. Johnson only seven were published in her lifetime. While Whitman died as the greatest poet of America, Emily Dickinson was nearly unknown at the time of her death.

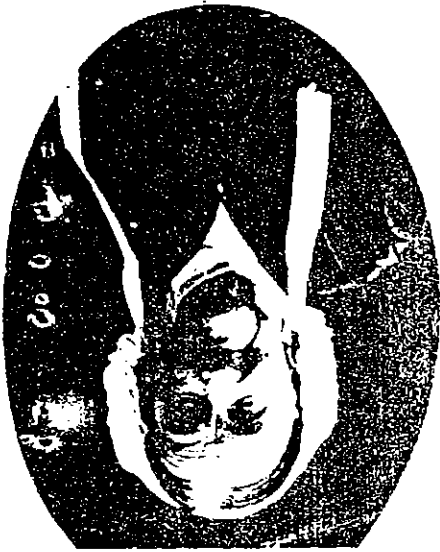
## 1.2 WHITMAN'S LIFE AND WORKS

Walt Whitman (1819-92) was born on Long Island where his early life was passed. While his father was a free-thinker from England, his mother was a Dutch Quaker who was an intensely religious person and believed that every person was guided by

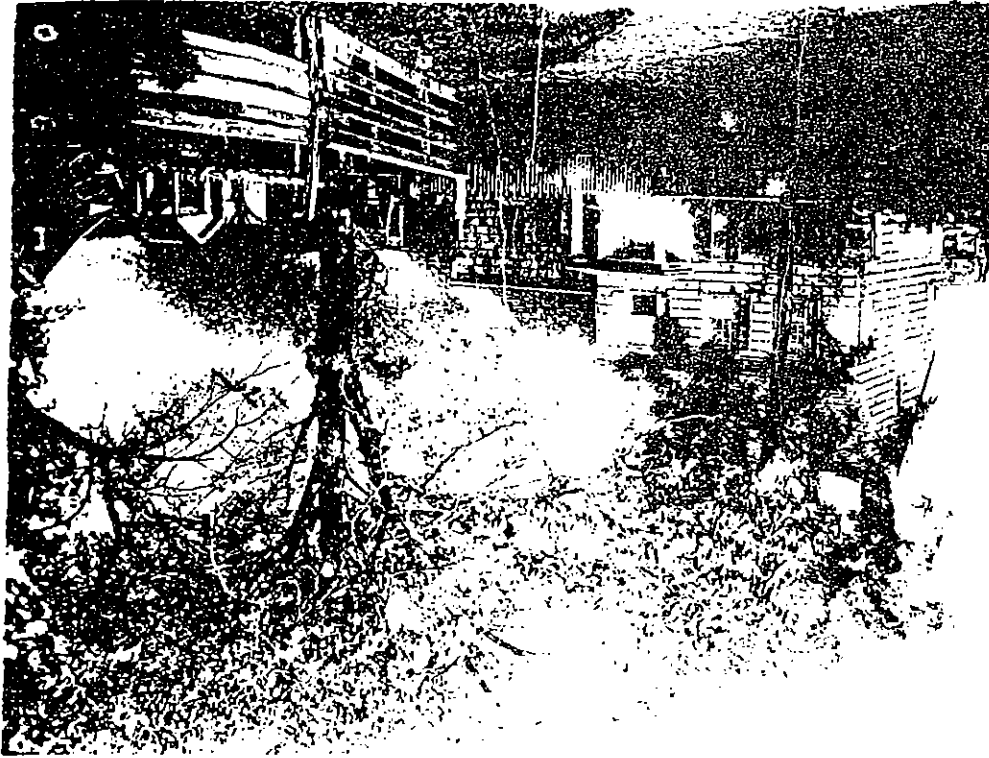
an inner light. From 1823 to 1833 his family moved to Brooklyn where Whitman had some years of formal schooling. Later on, Whitman broke out of the classroom and served as printer's devil, journeyman compositor and also as a school teacher. The shifting of jobs is an accurate reflection of a typical American trail—a quest for a meaningful vocation. From 1838 to 1839, he edited the *Long Islander*. Apart from his journalistic activity, he also read avidly the Bible, Shakespeare, Ossian, Scott, Homer and something of the Greek and Hindu poets. His reading also reflected his intellectual curiosity and keenness to assimilate the best works both of Europe and Asia. This kind of an exploration of the Western classics and Eastern lore is also found in other members of the American Renaissance like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Mark Twain.



Walter Whitman



Louisa Van Velsor Whitman



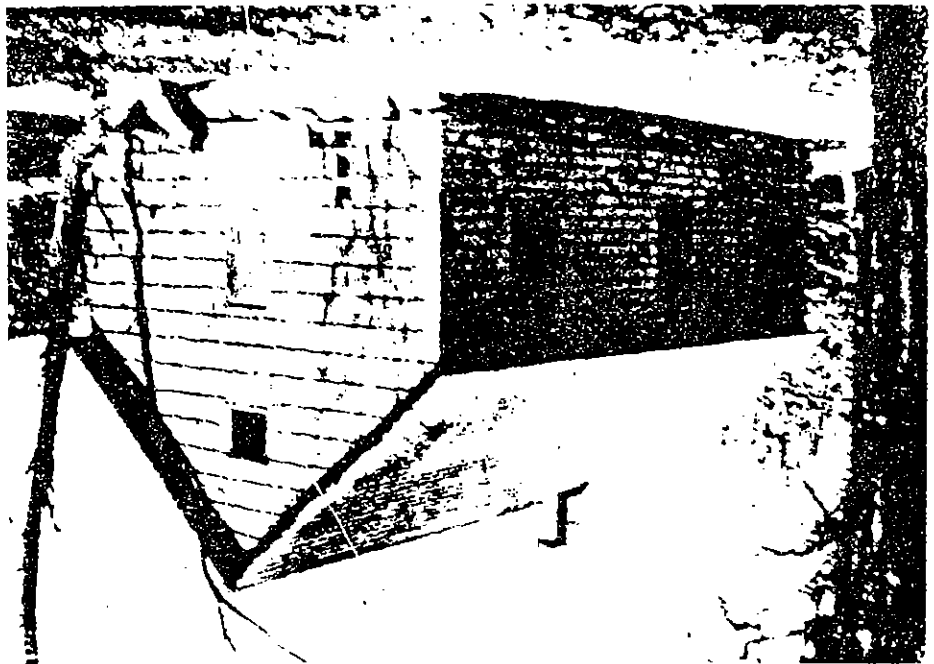
Whitman's birthplace, West Hills, New York

Winter Scene in Brooklyn (c.1817-20); painting by Francis Guy



Whitman's stay in Brooklyn and New York brought him in touch with party politics and he was associated with newspapers and magazines of the Democrats. He also contributed poems and stories to *Democratic Review* (1841-45) and much of his writings at this point of time were conventional, mediocre and sentimental. Later on, he became the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* which was the newspaper of Democratic party in 1846. While Democratic party took a pro-slavery stand, Whitman did not defend slavery but he also could not support the mad fanaticism of the ultra Abolitionists who wanted slavery to be abolished at one stroke by the President of the Union. The party establishment wanted the *Brooklyn Eagle* to accommodate both the pro and anti-Abolitionist stands purely from a commercial angle so that the circulation may not go down drastically. For refusing to toe the practical line adopted by the party establishment, Whitman was sacked as the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. This was Whitman's first encounter with party establishment and there is no wonder that Whitman began to hate party politics and began to take an independent, radical stand on the issue of slavery.

Whitman's schoolhouse in Woodbury, Long Island



In February 1848 Whitman went to New Orleans with his brother Jeff who was the most intimate with him in a large family of nine brothers and sisters. He also became the editor of *New Orleans Crescent* for three months. Later on, he returned to Brooklyn. He came via St. Louis, Chicago and upstate New York and saw something of the frontier and the harsh life of the pioneers. It was an experience that affected him strongly. He also edited various newspapers, including the *Brooklyn Times*. His prolonged stay in Brooklyn, also gave him an idea of the sights, hurry and bustle of the metropolis, that is, New York—the commercial centre of the New World. It was in the metropolis that Whitman became intimate with the drivers of omnibuses and ferryboat pilots, the crowds at the beaches and the political orators charged with partisan politics. He also indulged in his passion for Shakespeare's plays and Italian opera. As a young man he used to put on the airs of a dandy but later on he began to look more rough and unpolished. It was in this frame of mind that he published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. It consisted of twelve poems and a critical preface. *Song of Myself* is a long, rambling poem that figures in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Many critics admired the originality and vigour of the anthology but some critics were also disgusted with the explicit sex portrayal and denounced the work as an immoral book.

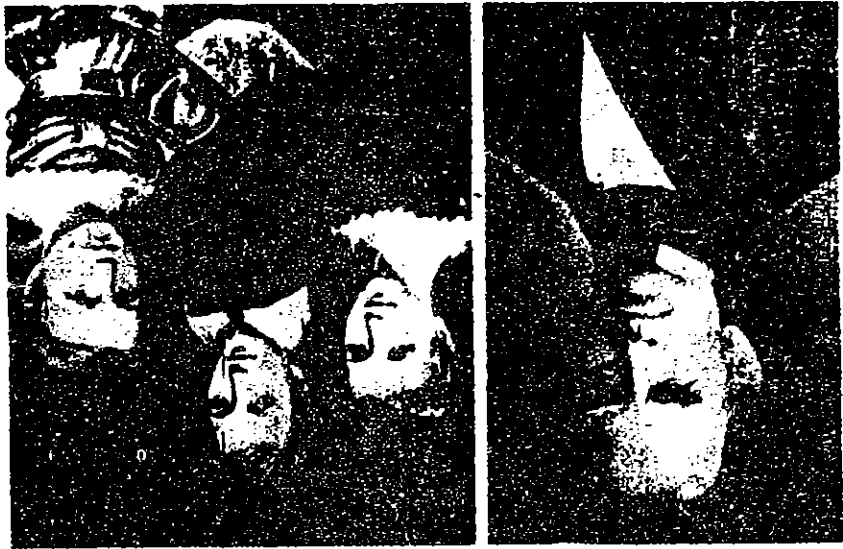
Controversy apart, *Leaves of Grass* is an anthology that is the magnum opus of Whitman's career as a poet. There is no wonder that the poet went on revising and enlarging it. *Leaves of Grass* is in free verse and is devoid of traditional rhyme and metre. Emerson greeted the publication of *Leaves of Grass* and lauded Whitman as the first authentic poet of the New World. Whitman published an enlarged second edition in 1856 and the third edition in 1860. It is strange that initially the poet was not much affected by the Civil War (1861-65) that rocked the Republic but it was the wounding of his brother in the Civil War that roused his strong emotions. He went to Washington and became an unofficial nurse to Northern and Southern soldiers in the army hospitals. It was the agony and suffering of the soldiers that seared and corroded Whitman's soaring idealism and optimism.

When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated after the end of the Civil War, Whitman was thoroughly shaken and he wrote his most popular lyric, "O Captain! My Captain!" and one of his major poems, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." The latter is an unforgettable elegy mourning the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln. For a short time Whitman worked as a clerk in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior but was dismissed by the Secretary on the ground that he was the notorious author of an immoral book like *Leaves of Grass*. In 1867 and 1871, Whitman issued two new editions of *Leaves of Grass*. His prose work *Democratic Vista* too appeared in 1871. It was in the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that *Passage to India* was included. It is, perhaps, the last major poem by Whitman in which there is a soaring vision of the entire globe, fusing the spiritual wisdom of the East with the materialism and technology of the West. Whitman suffered from a paralytic stroke in 1873 which was perhaps the result of an infection during his work in the army hospital.

During the last nineteen years of his life, Whitman lived a quiet life at Camden, New Jersey. He also brought out the last edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1889. He also went to Boston and met his mentor Emerson whom he still revered in spite of strong differences. Before his death, Whitman had become a national celebrity and the unquestioned bard of American democracy and received many visitors from abroad. His death led to a remarkable mourning and wave of sympathy in the nation and also abroad.



Emily as Lavinia remembered her



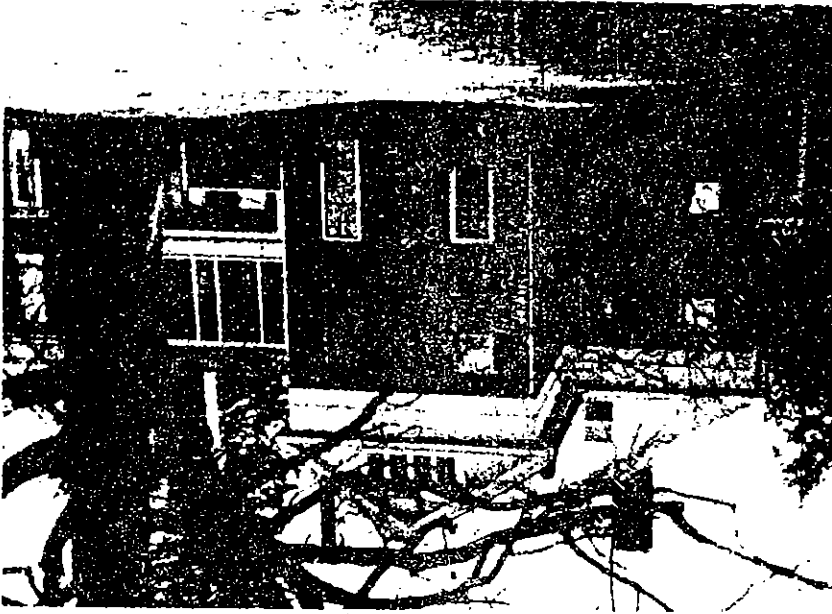
Edward Dickinson

Emily, Austin and Lavinia Dickinson, 1840

Emily Dickinson (1830-86) was the daughter of Edward Dickinson who was a prominent lawyer of Amherst, Massachusetts and Emily Norcross. Since her mother became a bed-ridden invalid, Emily Dickinson confessed she had no mother. It was Edward Dickinson, her strong and dominating father, who tended to be both father and mother to the child. He was such a stern and authoritarian father that he didn't permit Emily Dickinson to study at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for more than a year (1847-48). Like Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Edward Dickinson also believed that too much education was not becoming for a young woman. It led to the growth of female assertiveness and also caused a kind of discord and dissension in the family. Therefore, there is no wonder that Edward Dickinson also commanded his daughter not to go out of the Homestead which he had repurchased in 1855. As a young woman, Emily Dickinson asserted that she wouldn't go out of the Homestead ever. She even refused to go to the church which all women, old and young, were encouraged to visit.



Emily Dickinson's room



The Homestead, East Facade

Thus began a life of utmost seclusion and introversion for young Emily Dickinson. She was, however, attached to her brother Austin and his wife Sue. She also cultivated a number of intense intellectual companions. The first of them was Benjamin F. Newton who was a law student in her father's office. It was he who introduced her to many stimulating books and authors and also urged her to take seriously her vocation as a poet. It was Benjamin F. Newton who introduced her to the writings of Emily and Charlotte Bronte and also to the writings of a feminist Lydia Maria Child. The young man also presented to Emily Dickinson with a copy of Emerson's poetry in 1849—just two years after publication. Wall Whitman was, however, considered too immoral, and wickered a poet for a young woman like Emily Dickinson.

The early death of her first literary mentor as a result of T.B. was a great shock to the young woman and one could sense the rationale behind her lifelong preoccupation with death. Later on, she developed an intense relationship with Reverend Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia whom she met in 1854. She began to regard the priest as



her "dearest earthly friend" and in her poetry, early poetry she created the image of the lover whom she knew only through her imagination. Wadsworth's removal to San Francisco in 1862 marked a turning point in Emily Dickinson's life. From 1862 onwards her withdrawal from the life of the Puritan community in New England was nearly absolute and critics are of the view that from 1862 to 1865 there was a remarkable upsurge of her creativity as a poet. Since her poems were not meant for publication and were only her "letters to the world," it is not possible to date them with any degree of accuracy. Yet, there is adequate evidence that during 1862-1865 Emily Dickinson wrote nearly three hundred of her approximately 1700 and odd poems.

Although the publication of her poems was far from her mind, Emily Dickinson, however, had a budding poet's craving to find out if her poems were alive. On April 15, 1862 she wrote a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a professional man of letters to find out whether her verses "breathed." Higginson had been a Unitarian minister in Worcester who had resigned from the church and taken up writing, literary criticism as a career. He had written the "Letter to a young contributor" as the lead article in the *Atlantic Monthly* for April. Emily Dickinson sent a couple of unsigned poems to Higginson and wanted to know if her poems had genuine literary worth. Higginson sent her a reply, asking her to send some more poems, inquiring her age, her reading, her companions and further details about her writing. However, Higginson's advice to James T. Fields, the editor of the *Atlantic*, was that the poems were not good enough for publication. They were too raw and fragile to be published in a popular venture like the *Atlantic*.

Emily Dickinson, however, continued to exchange letters with her third literary mentor. The conventional literary taste of Higginson strengthened her resolve to keep her poems unpublished. She went on writing feverishly and kept her poems in packets—away even from the eyes of her brother Austin and sister Lavinia. She went on writing in her own unconventional way and the absence of the response of readers gave her the freedom to stick to her individual style. She was, however, indebted to Higginson for the intellectual companionship and invited him to Amherst. She wrote to him, "you were not aware," she said, "that you saved my life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests." (*Introduction to the poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977, sixth printing, p. xxiv.)



Emily Dickinson's white dress



Silhouettes of Dickinson family, 1847

It is unfortunate that "when Emily Dickinson died in 1886, she had published only seven poems, all anonymously" (*Emily Dickinson* by Donna Dickinson, Berg Learnington Spa/Dover NH/Heidelberg, 1985, p.97). While Higginson was of the view that her poems were too raw and fragile poems to be published in *The Atlantic*, Emerson was of the view that she wrote as if she was suffering from fever. Perhaps she was born too soon and it was only after her death that she got recognition. There is no wonder that five years after her death, her first book of poems went through six printings in six months. Twelve years later, her poems were translated into German. By 1920 she had become one of the greatest poets of American literature.

## 1.4 LET US SUM UP

Walt Whitman was a poet of the American Republic and he celebrated both the freedom of the individual and also the community of workers and artisans. Emily Dickinson was a lady born in an aristocratic family of Amherst and due to her intense love-hate relationship with an authoritarian father chose a life of utmost seclusion.

While Whitman achieved a degree of fame and odium as well in his life, Emily Dickinson was practically unknown during her lifetime. It was only after her death that she got recognition.

## 1.5 CHRONOLOGY

1789	Walter Whitman, the poet's father, born.
1795	Louisa Van Velsor, the poet's mother, born.
1816	Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor married.
1818	A brother, Jesse Whitman, born.
1819	Walter Whitman born in West Hills, Huntington, Long Island, on 31 May.
1821	A sister, Mary Elizabeth Whitman, born.
1823	A sister, Hannah Louisa Whitman, born.
1825	Moves to Brooklyn with his family.
1825	Attends the public schools.
1827	A brother, Andrew Jackson Whitman, born.
1829	A brother, George Washington Whitman, born.
1830	Leaves the public schools.
1831	Joins the staff of <i>Long Island Patriot</i> .
1834	A brother, Thomas Jefferson Whitman, born.
1835	Moves to New York City.
1836	Moves to Hempstead, Long Island, and begins teaching school.
1838	Begins newspaper career by serving as publisher and editor of <i>Long Islander</i> .
1839	Moves to Jamaica, Long Island.
	Works on <i>Long Island Democrat</i> .
	Resigns from the paper and returns to school teaching.
1841	Returns to New York City and works for various newspapers.
1842	<i>Franklin Evans</i> , a temperance novel, published.
1843	Edits <i>New York Statesman</i> .
1844	Edits <i>New York Democrat</i> .
1845	Edits <i>Long Island Star</i> .
	Moves to Brooklyn.
1846	Edits <i>Brooklyn Daily Eagle</i> .
1848	Visits New Orleans and works on <i>New Orleans Daily Crescent</i> . Edits <i>Brooklyn Daily Freeman</i> .

- 1855 *Leaves of Grass* published by Fowler and Wells in New York.  
 Father dies on 11 July.  
 1856 *Leaves of Grass* published by Fowler and Wells in New York.  
 1857 Edits *Brooklyn Daily Times*.  
 1859 Dismissed as editor of *Brooklyn Daily Times*.  
 1860 *Leaves of Grass* published by Thayer and Eldridge in Boston.  
 1862 Visits hospitals in Brooklyn to help Civil War wounded.  
 Goes to Washington to find his brother George, wounded in battle.  
 Secures an appointment as a copyist in the paymaster's office.  
 1863 Begins visits to wounded soldiers in Washington hospitals.  
 Returns to Brooklyn.  
 1864 Returns to Brooklyn.  
 1865 *Drum-Taps and Democratic Vistas* published.  
 Returns to Washington and works as clerk in Interior Department.  
 Fired by James Harland, new secretary of interior, but secures appointment  
 in attorney general's office.  
 1866 William Douglas O'Connor publishes *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication*  
 in defense of Whitman.  
 1867 *Leaves of Grass* published by William Chapin in New York. John  
 Burroughs publishes *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*.  
 1868 *Poems*, edited by William Michael Rossetti, published in England.  
 1871 *Leaves of Grass* published by J.S. Redfield in New York.  
 1872 *Passage to India and After All, Not to Create Only* published.  
 1872 *Leaves of Grass* pirated and published by John Camden Hotten in England.  
 1873 *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free* published.  
 Whitman suffers a stroke on 23 January.  
 1873 Mother dies on 23 May.  
 Leaves Washington for Camden, New Jersey.  
 1874 Whitman's position in Washington terminated.  
 1876 *Leaves of Grass* published by Whitman in Camden.  
 1879 *Memoranda During the War and Two Rivulets* published.  
 1879 *Leaves of Grass* published in an unauthorized reprinting by Worthington in  
 New York.  
 1880 Summers with Richard Maurice Bucke in London, Ontario.  
 1881 *Leaves of Grass* published by James R. Osgood in Boston, but withdrawn  
 from sale by the publisher after attorney general of Massachusetts declares  
 the book obscene.  
 Lectures on Lincoln before the St. Botolph Club in Boston.  
 1882 *Leaves of Grass* published by Whitman in Camden, then by Rees Welsh in  
 Philadelphia, then by David McKay in Philadelphia.  
 1883 *Specimen Days & Collect* published.  
 Richard Maurice Bucke publishes *Walt Whitman*.  
 1884 Buys house on Mickle Street in Camden.  
 1886 *Leaves of Grass* published by Walter Scott in England.  
 1887 *Specimen Days in America* published by Walter Scott in England.  
 1888 *Complete Poems and Prose* published by Whitman in Philadelphia (limited  
 to 600 copies).  
 November *Boughs* published.  
 Democratic *Vistas, and Other Papers* published by Walter Scott in  
 London.  
 1889 Suffers a stroke in June.  
 1889 *Leaves of Grass* published by Whitman in Philadelphia (limited to 300  
 copies).  
 1891 *Good-Bye My Fancy* published.  
 1892 *Leaves of Grass* published by David McKay in Philadelphia. Walt Whitman  
 dies on 26 March.  
 II. Emily Dickinson:  
 1830 10 December: Emily Dickinson born in Amherst, Mass.: second child, after  
 Austin (1829-95), of lawyer Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross  
 Dickinson. Dickinsons living in The Homestead, built by Edward's father  
 Samuel Fowler Dickinson.

- 1833 Lavinia ('Vinnie') Dickinson, sister, born (d.1899).  
 1835 Edward Dickinson appointed Treasurer of Amherst College.  
 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) publishes essay 'Nature.'  
 1837 Great Panic; thousands ruined in American business collapse.  
 1839 Margaret Fuller (1810-50) initiates female intellectual 'conversation' meetings in Boston, which continue until 1844.  
 1840 Grandfather Dickinson having moved to Ohio, Edward Dickinson sells his half of The Homestead and moves his family to another house in Amherst. Emily and Lavinia enter co-educational Amherst Academy. Emerson co-founds magazine *The Dial* (1840-44) with Fuller, prepares *Essays, First Series* (pub. 1841).  
 1842 Edward Dickinson elected State Senator in Massachusetts; elected again in 1843.  
 1845 Fuller's influential feminist tract *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* published (revised from *The Dial*). Mexican-American War until 1848; Texas joins U.S.; other Mexican territory annexed at end of war.  
 1846 Religious revival in Amherst. Emily has already been expressing doubt to her more pious friend Abiah Root. Emerson's *Poems* published.  
 1847 Emily enters Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in September. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte (1816-55) published under pseudonym of Currer Bell.
- 1833 Lavinia ('Vinnie') Dickinson, sister, born (d.1899).  
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- 1848 August: Emily withdraws from Mount Holyoke by father. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* published.  
 December: Emily Bronte dies. Seneca Falls Declaration marks beginning of American Women's Rights movement.  
 1849 Publication of *Kavanaugh*, popular romance novel by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; secretly given to Emily by her brother Austin.  
 1850 Another religious revival in Amherst; Edward Dickinson, Susan Gilbert and Lavinia Dickinson join First Church of Christ. Health of mother Emily Dickinson begins to decline. Publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, a romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64).  
 1851 Emily and Lavinia travel to Boston. Herman Melville (1819-91) publishes *Moby-Dick*.  
 1852 Edward Dickinson, conservative Whig Party candidate, elected to U.S. House of Representatives. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in book form.  
 1853 Amherst-Belchertown railroad opens, promoted by Edward Dickinson. Family visits Washington. *Walden, or Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) published.  
 1855 Emily and Lavinia visit Washington and Philadelphia. Edward Dickinson repurchases entire Homestead and returns family to paternal home; defeated in election in November; starts law partnership with son Austin. Mother Emily Dickinson begins to weaken; henceforth Emily and Lavinia run household, supported by domestics. Walt Whitman (1819-92) publishes *Leaves of Grass*. Charlotte Bronte dies.

1856 Austin joins First Church; marries Susan Gilben (1830-1913), Emily's closest friend; Austin and Sue move into The Evergreens, built for them by Edward Dickinson next to The Homestead.

1857 Emerson lectures in Amherst, stays with Austin and Sue; Emily doesn't attend. Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes her long narrative poem *Aurora Leigh*.

1858 Emily is writing poetry seriously, perhaps writes first 'Master' letter. Emily meets Catherine Scott (later Anthon), a friend of Sue, and considers her a close friend until 1866.

1860 Edward Dickinson declines nomination for Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts on conservative Constitutional Union ticket. Rev. Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia visits Emily. Abraham Lincoln, of the anti-slavery Republican Party, founded 1854, elected President.

1861 *Springfield Republican*, respected Western Mass. Newspaper edited by friend Samuel Bowles (1826-78), prints Emily's poem 'I taste a liquor never brewed—' retitled 'The May-Wine.' Friends begin to notice that Emily has been withdrawing gradually from society. Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies in Italy. Confederation of 11 Southern States secedes from the Union; April. Civil War begins.

1862 *Springfield Republican* publishes 'Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—'. During 1862-63, a period of crisis in her personal life, Emily writes about 300 poems. Frazar Strams, son of the President of Amherst College, killed in action. April: Emily replies to article in literary magazine *Allantic Monthly* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, literary figure and former preacher, includes poems, asks if her poetry 'is alive.'

1863 *February 1*: Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation frees the slaves. Two more poems by Emily printed; Emily in Boston seven months for treatment of eyes.

1865 By the end of this year Emily has written about a thousand poems. April: General Lee, Confederate Commander-in-Chief, surrenders; Lincoln assassinated.

1867 Austin supervises construction of new First church opposite Evergreens; Edward Dickinson gives dedicatory speech in 1868.

1870 Emily meets Higginson, who finds the visit exhausting. Family friend J.G. Holland becomes founding editor of important literary magazine *Scribner's*; although he has seen dozens of poems by Emily, he prints none.

Front door of the Dickinson Homestead



The Evergreens



- 1872 Edward Dickinson resigns Amherst Treasuryship, to be succeeded in 1873 by Austin. Publication of *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1819-1880). completed.
- 1873 Edward Dickinson elected to Massachusetts House of Representatives as independent candidate.
- 1874 Edward Dickinson dies suddenly in Boston. Austin and Sue's third child and Emily's favourite, Gilbert, born.
- 1875 Mother Emily Dickinson henceforth bedridden with paralysis.
- 1876 Helen Hunt Jackson, Amherst-born poet and novelist who has become Emily's friend and correspondent, urges Emily to publish George Sand, French woman novelist.
- 1878 By now Emily has written over 1,400 poems. Some in Amherst think Jackson's pseudonymously published 'Saxe Holme' stories are by Emily; Emily's 'Success is counted sweetest,' published anonymously in *A Masque of Poets* (No Name Series) after Jackson's urging, is thought by many to have been written by Emerson. Samuel Bowles dies.
- 1880 Judge Otis Lord, family friend and recent widower, visits frequently and discusses marriage with Emily.
- 1881 July: President Garfield shot, dies 19 September.
- 1882 April: Rev. Charles Wadsworth dies. September: Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd begin love affair. November: mother Emily Dickinson dies after long illness.
- 1883 Nephew Gilbert Dickinson dies.
- 1884 March: Judge Lord dies. June: Emily has first attack of kidney disease.
- 1885 Helen Hunt Jackson dies.
- 1886 May 15: Emily Dickinson dies of kidney disease. First selection of her poems published four years later in 1890, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. First *Collected Poems* published 1955, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.
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- 1.6 QUESTIONS
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1. Why was Whitman sacked as the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*?
2. How did the critics react to *Leaves of Grass*?
3. How did the Civil War affect Walt Whitman?
4. Who were the literary mentors of Emily Dickinson?
5. Why did Emily Dickinson live such a secluded life?
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- 1.7 SUGGESTED READING
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- Erkilla, Betsy. *Whitman: The Political Poet*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- McNeil, Helen. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Virago, Pantheon, Pioneers, 1986.
- Dickenson, Donna. *Emily Dickinson*. NH/Heidelberg: Berg Learnington Spa Dover, 1985.
- Johnson, Thomas H. Ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1977 (sixth printing).

## UNIT 2 THE TEXT 1: WALT WHITMAN

### Structure

2.0	Objectives
2.1	Introduction
2.2	<i>Song of Myself</i>
2.3	<i>Crossing Brooklyn Ferry</i>
2.4	<i>When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed</i>
2.5	<i>Passage to India</i>
2.6	Let Us Sum Up
2.7	Questions
2.8	Glossary
2.9	Suggested Reading

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of some of the major texts of Walt Whitman. While *Song of Myself* (1855) shows the poet's youthful exuberance and figures prominently in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass, Passage to India* occurs in (1871-72) edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

*Song of Myself* is the first major text of Walt Whitman included in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). It did not bear the writer's name, had only the title *Leaves of Grass* and the date and place of publication: Brooklyn, New York: 1855. It is a long rambling poem preoccupied with the poet's unique self. It also seeks to establish rapport, comradeship and utmost communion with the reader. The self of the poet seems to embrace nature, civilization, men, women and children. In other words, the cosmos is assimilated by the poet who emerges as the bard of American democracy. The youthful exuberance and high spirits found in *Song of Myself* is also present abundantly in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (1856) in which the focus is on the river, the sunset, the ferry boat and the details of daily life, the poet's self and the crowd, the present generation and the future generation, and the I of the poet and the you of the reader. The you also stands for all the commuters of the past, the present and the future who want to reach home. The poet celebrates human brotherhood and fraternity as the core of American Republic.

It was, however, the Civil War (1861-65) that marked a turning-point in the history of the American Republic. The North was able to subjugate the South and President Abraham Lincoln was re-elected as the supreme head of the Union. The assassination of the hero of the Civil War led to Walt Whitman's third major text, *When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed* (1965). It is a powerful elegy lamenting the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln, and also as a poem coming to terms with the assassination of the President. The poet is also able to picture death as a kind of prelude to national cohesion and rebirth and as the healer of the wounds of the Civil War. *Passage to India* (1871-72) is the fourth major text of Walt Whitman which was added to the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and it tries to fuse the technological progress of the New world with the ancient wisdom and love of the East. There is again a kind of soaring vision of the entire globe being united into a compact whole transcending the barriers of geography, history and culture. Long

before globalization could become a reality, Whitman could see the glimpses of a unified world emerging in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

## 2.2 "SONG OF MYSELF"

*Song of Myself* (1855) is a long, rambling poem which spans the poet's self, the reader, nature, and the cosmos. The poet is thirty-seven years old and is in perfect health. It is the earth consisting of rivers, mountains, wind that has nurtured him. Even within his house he is able to feel impact of all kinds of perfumes. What, however, he loves most is the feel of the world outside. It is the refreshing air, the rustle of green leaves, the silence of dry leaves, the sight of the sea-shore, and the sea-rocks that stir him deeply. They fill him with deep delight. One can see traces of Wordsworth's love of nature in Whitman's depiction of nature. There is, however, one important difference between Whitman and Wordsworth. While Whitman always refers to the reader and seeks involvement and communion with a like-minded soul, the poetry of Wordsworth is mostly that of a solitary man brooding and meditating.

There is no wonder that the you is as important in *Song of Myself* as the I. The poet asks the reader if he has an idea of the size of the earth. He also asks the reader, "Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?" In other words, unless the reader is able to respond to the sheer diversity and glory of the earth, he would not be able to grasp the full meaning of the text of *Song of Myself*. It is clear that the preoccupation with his own self does not turn Whitman into a hermit or a recluse. He wants to confirm if the reader would be able to measure up to Whitman's vision. In other words, the poet is as much pre-occupied with the celebration of his self as with the establishment of a community of like-minded people. The search for an ideal, healthy community is extremely important in *Song of Myself*.

The poet is also aware of "the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events; these come to me days and nights, and go from me again. But they not the Me myself". It is true that by and large Whitman is an optimist and like Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau believes that man can make phenomenal progress but he is also aware of the evils of slavery, the North-South divide and growth of sectarian violence that posed a great danger to the ideal of human brotherhood and fraternity.

One can, however, safely affirm that on the whole, *Song of Myself* is a poem of hope and fulfillment.

### Song of Myself

I

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume, you shall assume  
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my Soul;  
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass.  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death  
Creeds and schools in abeyance,  
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,  
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.



Houses and rooms are full of perfumes—the shelves are crowded with perfumes;

I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it;

The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume—it has no taste of the distillation—it is odorless;

It is for my mouth forever—I am in love with it;

I will go to the bank by the wood, and become undisguised and naked;

I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath;

Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine;

My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood

and air through my lungs;

The swift of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore, and dark-color'd

sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn;

The sound of the belch'd words of my voice, words loos'd to the eddies of

the wind;

A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms;

The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag;

The delight alone, or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hills-

sides;

The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and

meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? Have you reckon'd the earth

much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me, and you shall possess the origin of all

poems;

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the

eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books;

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me:

You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.

3

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the

end;

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,

Nor any more youth or age than there is now;

And will never be any more perfection than there is now,

Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge, and urge, and urge;

Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance—always substance and increase,  
always sex;

Always a knit of identity—always distinction—always a breed of life.

To elaborate is no avail—learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well enticed, braced in  
the beams,

Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,

I and this mystery, here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my Soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my Soul.  
Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,  
Till that becomes unseen, and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best, and dividing it from the worst, age vexes age;  
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I  
am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and  
clean;

Not an inch, nor a particle of an inch, is vile, and none shall be less familiar  
than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing:

As the hugging and loving Bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night,  
and withdraws at the peep of the day, with stealthy tend,

Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels, swelling the house with their  
plenty,

Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization, and scream at my eyes,  
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,

And forthwith cipher and show me a cent,  
Exactly the contents of one, and exactly the contents of two, and which is  
ahead?

4

Trippers and askers surround me;

People I meet—the effect upon me of my early life, or the ward and city I  
live in, or the nation,

The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,

The real or fancied indifference of some manor woman I love,  
The sickness of one of my folds, or of myself, or ill-doing, or loss or lack of

money, or depressions or exaltations;

Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful  
events;

These come to me days and nights, and go from me again,  
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am;

Stands amused, complacent, compassionate, idic, unitary;

Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,  
Looking with side-curved head, curious what will come next;

Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists  
and contenders;

I have no mockings or arguments—I witness and wait.

5

I believe in you, my Soul—the other I am must not abase itself to you;

And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass—loose the stop from your throat;  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want—not custom or lecture, not even the  
best;

Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how once we lay, such a transparent summer morning;

How you settled your head athwart my hips, and gently turn'd over upon me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my  
bare-strip heart,

And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the  
argument of the earth;

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own;

And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my  
sisters and lovers;

And that a keelson of the creation is love;

And limitless are leaves, stiff or drooping in the fields;

And brown ants in the little wells beneath them;

And mossy scabs of the worm fence, and heap'd stones, elder, mullein and  
poke-weed.

6

A child said, *What is the grass?* Fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff  
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrance, designedly dropt;

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and  
remark, and say, *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic;

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white;

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them  
the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you, curling grass;

It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men;

It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;

It may be you are from old people, and from women, and from offspring taken  
soon out of their mothers' laps;

And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers;

Darker than the colorless beards of old men;

Dark to come from under the faint red roots of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,

And I perceive they do not come from the roots of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of  
their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to  
arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward—nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?  
 I hasten to inform him or her, it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.  
 I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not  
 contain'd between my hat and boots,  
 And peruse manifold objects, no two alike, and every one good,  
 The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.  
 I am not an earth, nor an adjunct of an earth,  
 I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless  
 as myself;

(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

Every kind for itself and its own—for me mine, male and female,  
 For me those that have been boys, and that love women,  
 For me the man that is proud, and feels how it stings to be slighted,  
 For me the sweet-heart and the old maid—for me mothers, and the mothers  
 of mothers,  
 For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,  
 For me children, and the begetters of children.  
 Undraped! You are not guilty to me, nor stale, nor discarded,  
 I see through the broadcloth and gingham, whether or no,  
 And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away.

## 2.3 "CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY"

The poet uses 'I' and describes his meeting with 'you.' Who is 'you'? Is he a male or a female? A white or a black? As the poem is unfolded we are able to guess the identity of 'you'. It is clear that the poet is near Brooklyn Ferry. There is a flood in the sea. The sky is clouded. The sun too is in the sky—it is half-an hour from the sunset. The poet is able to have a glimpse of 'you' near Brooklyn Ferry. He is fascinated by the sight of 'you.' There are so many men and women who are ready to use Brooklyn Ferry and reach home. There would also be many more men and women who would use the Ferry in future as well. 'You' is, perhaps, a word that encompasses the men and women gathered near Brooklyn Ferry now and also the men and women who would gather in distant future. In other words, 'you' stands for all those commuters who are home-bound after a day's hard labour.

The past, present, and the future seem to constitute the eternal flux of time. Both men and women try to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry and reach home. Individuals stand alone and yet they form a part of multitude. The tie that binds transcends all barriers of space and time. The islands that are separated would be bound by Brooklyn Ferry. Even after a hundred years the commuters would continue to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry. In the third section of the poem, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, the poet explicitly defines 'you.' The word refers to the generation that is trying to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry now. It also refers to generations that would try to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry in future. In other words, 'you' refers to all men and women who are destined to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry.

The poet feels a kinship with the existing generation and also with the generations to come. The sea is full of countless ships and steam-boats. There are also seagulls hovering in the sky. The poet's eyes are also dazzled by the reflection of his head in sun-lit water. There is also a haze around the hills towards the south. While some ships are arriving, some have already arrived. The sea near Brooklyn Ferry has ships and steam-boats from all over the world. The flags of all nations are also visible. Long before globalization has started in the world today, there is a glimpse of the

process in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. At the time of the sunset, the flags will be lowered.

The poet is also able to visualize the life on land, the fires from the foundry, the chimneys belching smoke and the creeping of the night. The poet also affirms that what grips and moves him would also grip and move the generations, both the generation of his time and also the generations to come. The life on the land stirs him as deeply as the life on the sea. Both nature and cities fascinate him. As an inhabitant of Brooklyn, the ample hills around have been dear to him. So have been the streets of Manhattan island. He has also been keenly aware of his physical self and the capacity of his senses to reveal the glory of nature in all its beauty and diversity.

It doesn't, however, imply that the dark and sinister aspects of the life in mid-nineteenth century America were not known to a Romantic poet like Walt Whitman. He has been quite aware of evil in the world. He has been guilty of lying, stealing, grumbling and crookedness. He has also been affected by anger, lust and unspeakable longings. At times, he has been wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly and cowardly. There is a most memorable line in which the poet has described the evil within him, "The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me". One is reminded of Rousseau's candour and frankness when confronted with Whitman's stark portrayal of his dark self. In other words, he confesses that he is both "great and small".

There is a degree of sanity and self-knowledge in Walt Whitman that is astounding. He is a Romantic who is never carried too far away from reality. His feet are firmly planted on the solid earth. In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* both good and evil are pictured with candour and insight.

In the last section of the poem, the poet visualizes the panorama in and around Brooklyn Ferry. He urges the gorgeous clouds in the sky to drench him with their splendour. He also urges them to drench the generation of men and women negotiating Brooklyn Ferry. He urges them to drench with their splendour the generations to come. The proximity of the hills of Brooklyn and the masts of Manhattan is also suggested.

To sum up, the poet celebrates both his self and also what surrounds his self. That is the sea, the islands, the life in cities, the present and the future, the ships of all nations and their flags are as beautifully pictured as the poet's self, encompassing both good and evil. Life seems to have immense possibilities for Walt Whitman in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*.

There is a grain of truth in Charles Eliot Norton's description of Walt Whitman as "a compound of New England transcendentalist and New York rowdy" (*Walt Whitman's America* by David S. Reynolds, p.106).

### CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY

1

FLOOD-TIDE below me! I watch you face to face!

Clouds of the west - Sun there half an hour high - I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, How curious you

are to me!

On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are

more curious to me than you suppose,

And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and

more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,

The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one

disintegrated, yet part of the scheme,

The similitudes of the past, and those of the future,  
 The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings on the walk  
 in the street, and the passage over the river,  
 The current rushing so swiftly, and swimming with me far away,  
 The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,  
 The certainty of others—the life, love, sight, hearing of others.  
 Others will enter the gates of the ferry, and cross from shore to shore,  
 Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,  
 Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of  
 Brooklyn to the south and east;  
 Other will see the islands large and small;  
 Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour  
 high,  
 A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see  
 them,  
 Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the flood-tide, the falling back to the  
 sea of the ebb-tide.

## 3

It avails not, neither time or place - distance avails not,  
 I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many  
 generations hence,  
 Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;  
 Just as any of you is one of living crowd, I was one of a crowd,  
 Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I  
 was refresh'd,  
 Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood,  
 yet was hurried,  
 Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships, and the thick-stem'd pipes  
 of steamboats, I look'd.

I too may and many a time cross'd the river of old,  
 Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, I saw them high in the air, floating  
 with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,  
 Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in  
 strong shadow,  
 I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual edging toward the south,

Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,  
 Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,  
 Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in  
 the sun-lit water,  
 Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,  
 Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,  
 Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,  
 Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,  
 Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, -saw the ships at anchor,  
 The sailors at work in the rigging, or out astide the spars,  
 The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine  
 pennants,

The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,  
 The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,  
 The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,  
 The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the laded cups, the frolicsome  
 crests and glistening,

The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite  
 store-houses by the docks,  
 On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each  
 side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,

On the neighbouring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high  
and glaringly into the night,  
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over  
the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

4

These, and all else were to me the same as they are to you,

I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,

The men and women I saw were all near to me,

Others the same—other who look back on me, because I look'd forward to  
them,

(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it then between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it awaits not—distance awaits not, and place awaits not,

I too lived—Brooklyn, of ample tills, was mine,

I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around  
it,

I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,

In the day, among crowds of people, sometimes they came upon me,

In my walks home late at night, or as I lay in my bed, they came upon me,

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,

I too had receiv'd identity by my Body,

That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should be, I knew I should  
be of my body.

6

It is not upon you along the dark patches fall,

The dark threw patches down upon me also,

The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,

My great thoughts, as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?

Nor is it kyon alone who know what it is to be evil,

I am he who knew what it was to be evil,

I too knotted the old knot of contrariety,

Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,

Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,

Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,

The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,

The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,

Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting.

Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,

Was call'd by my mightiest name by clear loud voices of young men as they  
saw me approaching or passing,

Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh  
against me as I sat,

Saw many I loved in the street, or ferry-boat, or public assembly, yet never  
told them a word,

Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,  
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,

The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,  
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

7

Closer yet I approach you,

What, though you have of me, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in  
advance,

I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?

Who knows, but I am enjoying this?

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

8

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-herm'd

Manhattan?

River and sun-set, and my scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?

The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the

belated lighter?

What Gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I

love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I approach?

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks

in my face?

Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?

What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?

What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish, is accomplished, is it not?

9

Flow on, river! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!

Gorgeous clouds of the sun-set! Drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me;

Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!

Stand up, tall masts of Manahatta!—stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!

Throb, baffled and curious brain! Throw out questions and answers!

Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!

Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house, or street, or public assembly!

Sound out, voices of young men! Loudly and musically call me by my

highest name!

Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!

Play the old role, the role that is great or small, according as one makes it!

Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be

looking upon you;

Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the

hasting current;

Fly on, sea-birds! Fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;

Receive the summer sky, you water! And faithfully hold it, till all downcast

eyes have time to take it from you!

Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head,

in the sun-lit water!

Come on, ships from the lower bay! Pass up or down, whitesail'd schooners,

sloops, lighters!

Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!

Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! Cast black shadows at nightfall! cast

red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!

Appearances, how or henceforth, indicate what you are,

You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,

About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our divinest aromas,

Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient

rivers,

Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,

Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,

We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate hence-forward,

Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,

We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,



We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,  
You furnish your parts toward eternity,  
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Walt Whitman

## 2.4 "WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD" BLOOMED"

Walt Whitman wrote the poem in (1865) after Abraham Lincoln's assassination by John Wilkes Booth on April 14. While the North was full of black flags and a cry of vengeance filled the air, Booth's cry on the night of the assassination was—*Semper Tyrannis*. That is the tyrant had been justly punished. Whitman avoids the extreme position of the radical Republicans who wanted vengeance against the South and portrays Lincoln's death as the beginning of a new era of national reconciliation, and healing of the wounds of the Civil War. The poet has pictured Lincoln's death as the harbinger of a new era of peace and reconstruction.

There is a touch of the conventions of a pastoral elegy in *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*. Along with a sense of mourning there is also a kind of awareness of the return of spring. The poet's complex awareness of a sense of loss and a sense of rebirth and reawakening is expressed by the juxtaposition of Venus in the western sky and the blooming of the lilacs in the dooryard. While Venus seems to be drooping in the western sky, the lilacs are in full bloom. In other words, nature is both in a mood of mourning and also undergoing a subtle, somewhat hidden process of awakening and rebirth. It is true that the poem is full of melancholy and anguish but right from the beginning the blooming of the lilacs has also been pinpointed by Whitman. The title of the elegy is most appropriate and the reader is able to see beyond the gloom and hopelessness. It is the idea of "ever-returning spring" that counter-balances the gloom and melancholy in the poem.

It is, however, in section three of the poem that the poet has described in detail the old farmhouse where the lilac bush stands. It is tall and has heart-shaped leaves. There are fragrant flowers and rich green leaves. The poet takes a small branch from the bush and holds it in his hand. It has delicate and fragrant flowers. There is also a songbird, thrush, that is singing a song. The thrush is alone, like a hermit, and is singing in darkness. The thrush is singing because there is an intense pain in his heart. The thrush is singing because it is unavoidable. If he does not sing, he would die. It has to be noted that the poet identifies himself with the thrush. If the poet does not express his grief through his poem, he will die. He will not survive as a sane being. In section five of the poem, Whitman describes nature in full bloom. Spring has burst in all its vitality. Everywhere violets peep, grass grows, apple-trees turn pink and wheat fields turn dark brown. While nature is in full bloom, a corpse is carried in a coffin.

In section six of the poem, there is a detailed description of the coffin's journey through lanes, streets and states of the Union. A large number of men and women watch the coffin travel through the states of the Union. There is service in churches and the organ bursts in a crescendo. As the coffin passes the poet, he places on it the lilac branch in his hand. That becomes the poet's tribute to the corpse carried in the coffin. In other words, Abraham Lincoln's death and martyrdom also contain the seed of spring, that is revival and resurgence of the nation. Since there was a cry for vengeance all over the North after Lincoln's brutal assassination, Whitman has celebrated death in the seventh section of the poem. What he really wants to do is to minimize the horror of death and pinpoint its sacred glory and life-affirmation. Whitman conveys the sanctity of death, especially that of a martyr like Abraham Lincoln, in these words:

"All over bouquets of roses, O death? I cover you all with roses and  
lilies;"

In the next section, the poet appeals to the drooping star—Venus to rise again and dispel the night. White Venus has disappeared, the thrush has been singing in darkness. One is reminded of Keat's nightingale that too sings in darkness. Whitman lays stress on the thrush singing somewhere in the swamp. He also admits that he is not able to express all that he feels. The man whose death he has been mourning was large, noble and comprehensive. He has also been buried in the grave. The poet's loss is simply unbearable. In section eleven of the poem Whitman draws a glowing picture of the farms and homes. He also remembers the sinking sun that looks gorgeous. The grass and the green leaves are fresh and resplendent. The workers are returning home in dense over-crowded cities. The poet seems to be as much preoccupied with Lincoln's death as with spring—the harbinger of new life.

There is also a panorama of Manhattan with its huge sky—scrapers and ships in the harbour. The sun shines, looking both calm and haughty. While days are pleasant, the nights are welcome. In this atmosphere, the poet urges the thrush to sing on and on. Let him sing from the swamps, let him sing from inside the bushes, let him sing his loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe. The poet feels that the drooping Venus, the thrushes' song and the hia in his hand constitute a kind of unity, and togetherness. Their unbreakable bond and kinship has been sharply pinpointed in section thirteen of the poem. In the next section of the poem, there is the most lyrical and moving part of the elegy. The poet has described the scenery of his land with its lakes and forests, farms and fields, winds and storms. The land where men and women toil and extract the bounty of nature. It is in the midst of the manifold activities of life that he is able to have the sacred knowledge of death. In other words, the poet is able to juxtapose life and death. He is able to visualise life-in-death. He also pictures death as a deliverer, that is as a goddess that liberates us from the tangles of life. It is in section sixteen of the poem that the song of death is pictured. One is reminded of Keat's famous observation, "Death is the mace of life." One can safely affirm that *Death Carol* is the most original and the most resonant section of the elegy.

Like a Romantic poet, Whitman celebrates Death as a deliverer and he also wants to heal the wounds of the Civil War by affirming the positive qualities of Lincoln's martyrdom. The journey of the coffin across the length and breadth of the nation is also an attempt to transcend the horrors of the Civil War. Yet, the poet is too much of a realist to forget completely the horrors of the Civil War. In section eighteen of the poem there is a vivid description of the horror of the Civil War that had threatened the Union. As a great humanist Whitman says:

"I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
And the white skeletons of youngmen—I saw them;  
I saw the debris and debris of all dead soldiers of the war!"

One is reminded of the horror of war that is pictured at the end of the *Mahabharata* and such a stark picture of the destructiveness of war could only strengthen one's resolve to work for peace. All in all, *When Lilies Last In The Dooryard Bloomed* is as much a poem of mourning as it is a poem of life-affirmation.

### WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOOR-YARD BLOOM'D

First published in "When Liliac Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd," 1865-6

When Lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd – and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.  
Ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

powerful, western, fallen star!  
shades of night! O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd! O the black mark that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my soul.

3

In the door-yard fronting an old farm-house, near the whitewash'd  
pallings,  
Stands the lilac bush, tall-growing, with heart-shaped leaves of rich  
green,  
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume  
strong I love,  
With every leaf of miracle and from this bush in the door-yard,  
With delicate-color'd blossoms, and heart-shaped leaves of rich  
green,  
A sprig, with its flower, I break.

4

In the swamp, in secluded recesses,  
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary, the thrush,

The hermit, withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,

Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,  
Death's outlet song of life, (for well, dear brother, I know,  
If thou wast not gifted to sing, thou would'st swely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,  
Amid lanes, and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd  
from the ground, spotting the gray debris,  
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the  
endless grass,  
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every gain from its shroud in the  
dark-brown fields uprisen,  
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,  
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,

6

Night and day journeys a coffin.

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,  
Through day and night, with the great cloud darkening the land,  
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags, with the cities draped in black,  
With the show of the States themselves, as of crape-veil'd women  
standing,  
With processions long and winding, and the flambeaus of the night,  
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces, and the  
unbarred heads,  
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,  
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong  
and solemn,  
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,  
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs - where amid these  
you journey,

With the tolling, tolling bells' perpetual clang,

Here, Coffin that slowly passes,

I give you my sprig of lilac.

7

(Not for you, for one, alone,  
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,

For Fresh as the morning, thus would I carol a song for you  
 O same and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,

O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,

But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,

Copious, I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,

With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,

For you, and the coffins all of you, O death.)

8

O western orb, sailing the heaven,

Now I know what you must have meant as a month since we walk'd,

As we walk'd up and down in the dark blue so mystic,

As we walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,

As I saw you had something to tell, as you bent to me nigh after

night,

As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the

other stars all look'd on.)

As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something, I know

not what, kept me from sleep.)

As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west, ere you

went, how full you were of woe,

As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze, in the cold transparent

night,

As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black

of the night,

As my soul, in its trouble, dissatisfied, sank, as where you sad orb,

Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

9

Sing on there in the swamp,

O singer bashful and tender! I hear your notes, I hear your call,

I hear, I come presently, I understand you,

But a moment I linger, for the lustous star has detain'd me,

The star, my departing comrade, holds and detains me.

10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?

And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?

And what shall my perfume be, for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds, blown from east and west,

Blown from the eastern sea, and blown from the western sea, till

there on the prairies meet,

These and with these and the breath of my chant,

I perfume the grave of him I love.

11

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?

And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,

To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring, and farms, and homes,

With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid

and bright,

With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun,

burning, expanding the air,

With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of

the trees prolific,

In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-

dapple here and there;

With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky,

and shadows,

And the city at hand, with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,  
And all the scenes of life, and the workshops, and the workmen  
homeward returning.

12

Lo, Body and soul - this land,  
My own Manhattan, with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying  
tides, and the ships;  
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light,  
Ohio's shores, and flashing Missouri,

And ever the far-spreading prairies, cover'd with grass and corn.  
Lo, the most excellent sun, so calm and haughty,  
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,  
The gentle soft-born measureless light,  
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,  
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night, and the stars,  
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

13

Sing on, Sing on, you gray-brown bird,  
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the  
bushes,

Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,  
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid, and free, and tender!  
O wild and loose to my soul - O wondrous singer!

You only I hear - yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart)  
Yet the lilac, with mastering odor, holds me.

14

Now while I sat in the day, and look'd forth,  
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the  
farmers preparing his crops,  
In the large unconscious scenery of my land, with its lakes and  
forests,

In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds, and the  
storms,)

Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the  
voices of children and women,

The many-moving sea-tides - and I saw the ships how they sail'd,  
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy  
with labor,

And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its  
meals and minuita of daily usages,

And the streets, how their throbbings throbb'd, and the cities pent-  
to, then and there,

Falling upon them all, and among them all, enveloping me with the  
rest,

Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,  
And I knew Death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,  
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,  
And I in the middle, as with companions, and as holding the hands of  
companions,

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,  
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the  
dimness,

To the solemn shadowy cedars, and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest received me,  
 The gray-brown bird I know, received us comrades three,  
 And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.  
 From deep secluded recesses,  
 From the fragrant cedars, and the ghostly pines so still,  
 Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,  
 As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,  
 And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

DEATH CAROL

16

Come, lovely and soothing death,  
 Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
 In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
 Sooner or later, delicate death,

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,  
 For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,  
 And for love, sweet love—but praise! Praise!  
 For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark Mother always gliding near with soft feet,  
 Have none changed for thee a charm of fullest welcome?  
 Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,  
 I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come  
 unfalteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,  
 When it is so, when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing the dead,  
 Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,  
 Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,  
 Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings  
 for thee,  
 And the sights of the open landscape, and the high-spread sky, are  
 fitting,  
 And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence under many a star,  
 The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave whose voice I  
 know,  
 And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd death,  
 And the body grateful nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,  
 Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields, and the  
 prairies wide,  
 Over the dense-pack'd cities all, and the teeming wharves and ways

I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

15

To the tally of my soul,  
 Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,  
 With pure, deliberate notes, spreading, filling the night.  
 Loud in the pines and cedar's dim,  
 Clear in the freshness moist, and the swamp-perfume,  
 And I with my comrades there in the night,  
 While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,  
 As to long panoramas of visions.

I saw askant the armies,  
 And I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,  
 Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles, I  
 saw them,  
 And carried hither and you through the smoke, and torn and bloody,  
 And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,  
 And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
 And the white skeletons of young men—I saw them;  
 I saw the debris and debris of all the dead soldiers of the war,  
 But I saw they were not as was thought,  
 They themselves were fully at rest—they suffer'd not,  
 The living remain'd and suffer'd—the mother suffer'd,  
 And the wife and the child, and the musing comrade suffer'd,  
 And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

16

Passing the visions, passing the night,  
 Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,  
 Passing the song of the hermit bird, and the tallying song of my soul,  
 Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying, ever-altering song,  
 As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding  
 the night,  
 Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again  
 bursting with joy,  
 Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,  
 As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,  
 Passing, I leave thee liliac with heart-shaped leaves,  
 I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,  
 From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing  
 with thee,

O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

20

Yet each keep, and all, retrievements out of the night,  
 The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,  
 And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,  
 With the lustrous and drooping star, with the countenance full of  
 woe,

With the holders holding my hand, nearing the call of the bird,  
 Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever I keep, for  
 the dead I loved so well,

For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands - and this for  
 his dear sake,

Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul,  
 There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

## 2.5 "PASSAGE TO INDIA"

Walt Whitman included *Passage to India* in the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It is a poem in which he is celebrating the achievements of engineers who have designed the Suez Canal, leading to the linking of Europe and Asia. The opening of the Suez Canal and the laying down of cables across the oceans have linked Europe, Asia and North America. The Poet is filled with joy and is in a mood to celebrate the present. It seems so exciting that the past seems remote and shadowy. The poet.

however, can see the present growing out of the past. This crucial point is stressed by the poet in a memorable line, "For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?"

The second section of the poem begins with a refrain, "Passage O Soul, to India?" The refrain indicates the poet's sense of adventure and journey to the mystical land of the East, that is Asia. The journey is more than a physical journey. It is also a journey into the myths and fables of Asia and Africa. Science and technology developed in Europe and North America are important but equally (if not more) are the myths and fables of Asia and Africa. There are temples dedicated to the sun, there are fables pertaining to ancient gods and goddesses, there are lofty towers, there are towers red as roses—the poet celebrates all—all of them. The poet also celebrates a new religion. He celebrates engineers, architects, voyagers and explorers. He projects a soaring vision of "the oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near, the lands to be welded together".

There is a hunger to colonize and conquer all lands and all peoples. Globalization seems to be the goal that Walt Whitman is projecting so ecstatically in *Passage to India*. The poet also makes it clear that the hunger to colonize and conquer all lands and all peoples is not purely from a selfish motive of trade and commerce. It is a spiritual imperative in order to justify God's name and the soul's immense possibilities of growth and perfection. The poet affirms that America's destiny would be fulfilled through colonization, conquests and assimilation. A reader of Asia and Africa will, however, respond to Whitman's globalization with a far degree of suspicion. If Whitman is a bard of American democracy, he has also traces of American love of global hegemony.

In the third section, Whitman juxtaposes two exciting scenes. At first he visualizes the completion and the opening of the Suez canal and the movement of steam ships through the channel. He also pays a tribute to the strange landscape, the pure sky and the sand around the channel. He can also see workers gathering around huge dredging machines. Along with the opening of the Suez canal, Whitman is also able to visualize the opening up of the vast American continent through the Pacific Railroad. The poet is able to hear "the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle". The thrust of the sudden expansion makes the poet measure the length and breadth of the American continent. The poet is able to picture in vivid detail the opening up of the vast land. He has glimpses of the great mountains, the Wind River, the Wahsatch mountains. He has also a sight of Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest. Whitman's imagination is able to encompass almost the entire landscape of the continent. Thus the exploration into the New World and into Asia occurs more or less simultaneously. The poet also recalls Christopher Columbus, a Genoese, whose daring adventure led to the discovery of the North American continent. He also says that the great explorer's dream is going to be realized soon.

"Passage to India" is the ringing refrain that occurs at the beginning of the section 2, 3 and 4 of the poem. It seems to create a strong unity of impression of man's indomitable urge to conquer the vast, unending land mass in North America, Europe and Asia. It also signifies the overcoming of barriers and an affirmation of the oneness of mankind. The poet also recalls Vasco de Gama's quest for the New World, the discovery of India and the founding of a new nation. The poet also celebrates man's conquest of continents and the fulfillment of man's destiny. *Passage to India* is a culmination of the history of the modern time. It is uplifting like the crescendo of a thrilling song. The time is such that even the unattainable can be attained, even the stars can be grabbed. Such is the robust optimism of Walt Whitman, reminding us of Robert Browning's observation, "Grow along with me, the best is yet to be." There is something of the visionary and the dreamer in Whitman's *Passage to India*.

In the sixth section, the poet has drawn an exalted picture of the earth floating in space. He says, "O, vast Rondure, swimming in space, covered all over with visible power and beauty". The earth is floating in the procession of sun, moon and



countless stars. On the earth, one can see grass, waters, animals, mountains and trees. All objects big or small, are instinct with life. They seem to be a manifestation of a divine purpose. The poet is also able to go back to the past, that is the beginning of human life. He can see in imagination Adam and Eve and their progeny. He makes it clear that Adam and Eve appear in the garden of Eden, located in Asia. The poet also visualizes the future. After the seas have been crossed, after the captains and engineers have done their work, after the inventors, the scientists, the chemists, the geologists, the ethnologists, a great bard would come. The bard's song would mark the culmination of the work of voyagers, scientists and inventors. It is through the bard's endeavour that "Nature and Man shall be disjoined, and diffused no more, the true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them".

In the seventh section of the poem the poet again refers to "the marriage of continents, climates and oceans". There is a sense of urgency that is reflected in the next section of the poem. It is a time that reminds one of the land that lies beyond Europe and North America. The poet refers to the new frontier that challenges the voyagers and explorers, "The old, most populous, wealthiest of the Earth's lands, the stream of the Indus and the Ganges, and their many affluents". It would be flattering to readers of today to realize how the land of the Indus and the Ganges stimulated the imagination of a poet like Walt Whitman.

In section nine of the poem, the poet again celebrates the navigators and explorers who discovered North America. There is an unforgettable image of the visionary who sailed towards the New World facing innumerable hurdles. In section ten, the poet celebrates the sense of adventure and the hunger for the unknown that burns in the bosom of the young. There is a sense of urgency that is found in section eleven of the poem. The poet says, "O we can wait no longer! We too take ship, O soul". There is a modified refrain that is found in section twelve and thirteen of the poem. That is, "Passage to more than India". In other words, the frontier is not limited to India. The frontier is beyond India. The adventure of navigators and explorers would not be confined to the colonization of India. It would go far beyond the Indian continent. The core of the poem does not lie in arrival. It lies in the journey, in endless exploration. The poet sums up the core of *Passage to India* in these words:

"For we are bound where the mariner has not yet dared to go,  
And we risk the ship, ourselves and all."

## PASSAGE TO INDIA

First published in 1870

I

SINGING my days,  
Singing the great achievements of the present,  
Singing the strong, light works of engineers,  
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outwied,)  
In the Old World, the east, the Suez canal,  
The New by its mighty railroad spam'd,  
The seas inlaid with eloquent, gentle wires;  
Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul,  
The Past! the Past! the Past!

The Past—the dark, unathom'd retrospect!  
The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows!  
The past—the infinite greatness of the past!  
For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?  
(As a projectile form'd, impell'd passing a certain line, still keeps on,  
So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)

2

Passage, O soul, to India!  
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

Not you alone proud truths of the world,

Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science,

But myths and fables of old—Asia's, Africa's fables,

The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,  
The deep diving bibles and legends,

The daring plots of the poets—the elder religions;

--O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!  
O you fables spurning the known, ejuding the hold of the known,

mounting to heaven!

You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd  
with gold!

Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!

You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest!

You too with joy I sing.

3

Passage to India!

Lo, soul! Seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,

The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,

The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,

The lands to be welded together.

A worship new I sing,

You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,

You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,

You, not for trade or transportation only,

But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.

3

Passage to India!

Lo, soul, for thee, of tableaus twain,

I see in one the Suez canal initiated, open'd,

I see the procession of steamships, the Empress Eugenie's leading  
the van,

I mark from the deck, the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level  
sand in the distance,

I pass swiftly the picturesque groups, the workmen gather'd,

The gigantic dredging machines.

In one again, different, (yet thine, O soul, the same,)  
I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad, surrounding every  
barrier,

I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte, carrying  
freight and passengers,

I here the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-  
whistle,

I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the  
world,

I cross the Laramie plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes—the  
buttes,

I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless,  
sage-deserts,

I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great  
mountains, I see the Wind River and the Wahsatch

I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest, I pass the  
Promontory, I ascend the Nevadas,

I scan the noble Elk mountain and wind around its base,

I see the Humboldt range, I thread the valley and cross the river,

I see the clear waters of Lake Tahoe, I see forests of majestic pines,  
Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchanting  
mirages of waters and meadows,

Marking through these, and after all, in duplicate slender lines,  
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,  
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,  
The road between Europe and Asia.

(Ah Genoese thy dream! thy dream!  
Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,  
The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.)

4

Passage to India!  
Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead,  
Over my mood stealing and spreading they come,  
Like clouds and cloudlets in the unreach'd sky.  
Along all history, down the slopes,  
As a ravel running, sinking now, and now again to the surface  
rising,  
A ceaseless thought, a varied train—Lo, soul, to thee, thy sight, they  
rise,

The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions;

Again Vasco de Gama sails forth,

Again the knowledge gain'd, the mariner's compass,

Lands found, and nations born—thou born, America,

For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd,

Thou rondure of the world, at last accomplish'd

5

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,  
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,  
Alternate light and day and the seeming spiritual darkness,  
Unspcakable, high processions of sun and moon and countless stars  
above,  
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,  
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden, prophetic intention,  
Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.

Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,

Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,

Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,

With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish with never-happy  
hearts,

With that sad incessant refrain, *wherefore unsatisfied Soul?* And

*Wither O mocking Life?*

Ah, who shall soothe these feverish children?

Who justify these restless explorations?

Who speak the secret of impassive Earth?

Who bind it to us? What is this separate Nature, so unnatural?

What is this earth to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb  
to answer ours,

Cold earth, the place of graves.)

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains—and shall be carried out,  
(Perhaps even now the time has arrived.)

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)  
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,

After the noble inventors—after the scientists, the chemist, the  
geologist, ethnologist,

Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name,

The true Son of God shall come singing his songs.

Then, not your deeds only, O voyagers, O scientists and inventors,

shall be justified,

All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,

All affection shall be fully responded to—the secret shall be told,  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and

link'd together,

The whole Earth this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be

completely justified,

Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by  
the true son of God, the poet,

(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,

He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose,) Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,

The true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

6

Year at whose wide-lung door I sing!

Year of the purpose accomplish'd!

Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!

(No mere Doge of Venice now, wedding the Adriatic.)

I see, O Year, in you the vast terraqueous globe, given, and giving

all,

Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World,

The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival

garland,

As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.

7

Passage to India!

Cooling airs from Caucasus far, soothing cradle of man,

The river Euphrates flowing, the past lit up again.

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,

The old, most populous, wealthiest of Earth's lands,

The streams of the Indus and the Ganges, and their many affluents,

(I my shores of America walking to-day behold, resuming all)

The tale of Alexander, on his warlike marches, suddenly dying,

On one side China and on the other side Persia and Arabia,

To the south the great seas and the Bay of Bengal,

The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,

Old occult Brahma, interminably far back, the tender and junior

Buddha,

Central and southern empires, and all their belongings, possessors,

The wars of Tamertane, the reign of Aunungzeb,

The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium, the

Arabs, Portuguese,

The first travelers, famous yet, Marco Polo, Batouta the Moor,

Doubts to be solv'd, the map incognita, blanks to be fill'd,

The foot of man unstay'd, the hands never at rest,

Thyself O soul that will not brook a challenge.

8

The medieval navigators rise before me,

The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise,

Something swelling in humanity now like the sap of the earth in

spring,

The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.

And who art thou, said shade?

Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,

With majestic limbs, and pious, beaming eyes,

Spreading around, with every look of thine, a golden world,

Enhuing it with gorgeous hues.

As the chief historian,  
Down to the foothlights walks, in some great scena,  
Dominating the rest, I see the Admiral himself,  
(History's type of courage, action, faith.)  
Behold him sail from Palos, leading his little fleet,  
Behold him behold—his return—his great fame,  
His misfortunes, calumniators—behold him a prisoner, chain'd,  
Behold his defection, poverty, death.

(Curious in time I stand, noting the efforts of heroes,  
Is the deferment long? bitter the slander, poverty, death?  
Lies the seed unreck'd for centuries in the ground? lo, to God's due  
occasion,  
Uprising in the night, it sprouts, blooms,  
And fills the earth with use and beauty.)

7

Passage indeed O soul to primal thought,  
Not lands and seas alone—thy own clear freshness,  
The young maturity of brood and bloom,  
To realms of budding bibles.

O soul, repressless, I with thee, and thou with me,  
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,  
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,  
To reason's early paradise,  
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,  
Again with fair Creation.

8

O we can wait no longer,  
We too take ship O soul,  
Joyous, we too launch out on trackless seas  
Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,  
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, O  
soul)

Caroling free, singing our song of God,  
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.  
With laugh and many a kiss,  
(Let others deprecate—let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation,)  
O soul thou pleasest me, I thee.

Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,  
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,  
Sailing these seas or on the hills or waking in the night,  
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time, and Space and Death, like waters  
flowing,  
Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,  
Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave me all over,  
Bathe me O God, in thee, mounting to thee,  
I and my soul to range in range of thee.

O Thou transcendant,  
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,  
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them,  
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,  
Thou moral, spiritual fountain - affection's source - thou reservoir,  
(O pensive soul of me! O thirst unsatisfied! waitest not there?  
Waitest not haply for us, somewhere there, the Comrade perfect?)

Thou pulse - thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,  
 That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,  
 Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space,  
 How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how speak, if, out  
 of myself,  
 I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,  
 At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,  
 But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,  
 And lo, Thou gently masterest the orbs,  
 Thou matest Time, smildest content at Death,  
 And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,  
 Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;  
 --What love, than thine and ours could wider amplify?  
 What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours, O soul?  
 What dreams of the ideal? What plans of purity, perfection, strength?  
 What cheerful willingness for others' sake, to give up all?  
 For others' sake to suffer all?

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,  
 The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,  
 Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,  
 As, fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,  
 The younger melts in fondness in his arm.

9

Passage to more than India!  
 Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?  
 O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those?  
 Disportest thou on waters such as those?  
 Soundest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?  
 Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!  
 Passage to you, to mastery of you, ye strangling problems!  
 You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reach'd  
 you.

Passage to more than India!  
 O secret of the earth and sky!  
 Of you, O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!  
 Of you, O woods and fields! Of you, strong mountains of my land!  
 Of you, O prairies! Of you, gray rocks!  
 O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!  
 O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon, and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!  
 Passage to you!

Passage--immediate passage! The blood burns in my veins!  
 Away, O soul! Hoist instantly the anchor!  
 Cut the hawsers--haul out--shake out every sail!  
 Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?  
 Have we not grovell'd here long enough, eating and drinking like  
 mere brutes?  
 Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough?  
 Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!  
 Reckless, O soul, exploring. I with thee, and thou with me.

For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,  
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

○ my brave soul!

○ farther, farther sail!

○ daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?

○ farther, farther, farther sail!

## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

*Leaves of Grass* is the major work of Walt Whitman. Its first edition was published in 1855 and the last death-bed edition was published in 1891-92.

While *Song of Myself* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* reflect Walt Whitman's youthful exuberance and hope, *When Lilacs In The Dooryard Bloomed* and *Passage to India* are poems that reflect the poet's more mature vision.

Belief in the individual is counter-balanced by Whitman's celebration of comradeship between man and man. There is evil in man and in society but on the whole joy, order and harmony prevail in the cosmos.

## 2.7 QUESTIONS

1. "Beginning with the I of the poet and ending with the you of the reader, the opening lines mark the poles between which the poem swings." Do you agree with this assessment of Whitman's *Song of Myself*? Discuss with reference to the text that you have read.
2. How are the past, the present and the future linked in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*?
3. Bring out the full significance of the title, "When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed?"
4. How does Walt Whitman visualise Death in "When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed"? Do you agree with Whitman's assessment of Death?
5. *Passage to India* is a celebration of the New World encompassing Asia, Europe and North America.
6. "Whitman is an imperialist who celebrates American hegemony of the globe in *Passage to India*." Do you agree with this evaluation of the poem?
7. Examine the traces of Transcendentalism in Walt Whitman's major poems that you have studied.
8. How is nature pictured in Whitman's poetry? Do you think he could be described as the Wordsworth of American poetry?
9. "The Self is full of immense possibilities of growth in the New World." Do you agree with this view of the self in Whitman's poetry?

## 2.8 GLOSSARY

**Manhattan:** the most important part of New York; also the name of the island.  
**Brooklyn:** a suburb where Whitman lived  
**Great star:** Venus in the western sky  
**Flambeaus:** flaming torches  
**Genesee:** Christopher Columbus who discovered North America

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## 2.9 SUGGESTED READING

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1. Extracts from Walt Whitman's major poems are from *The Walt Whitman Reader: Selections from Leaves of Grass*. (Courage Books an imprint of Running Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1997.)  
Note: the text of this edition is based on the 1891-92 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
2. *Whitman, Slavery and The Emergence of Leaves of Grass* by Martin Klammer (The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1995).
3. *Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1965.



In our selection, we would focus your attention on 303 where the choice to live a completely secluded life has been affirmed. In 373, the poet fancies what her life would be if she were to become a queen. There is another poem, 430 in which the speaker walked as if her body had wings but suddenly she lost her elan and turned into a beggar. In 561, the protagonist tries to visualize the various faces of grief—including death. 712 is one of the most popular of Emily Dickinson's poems where death has been pictured as a most civil person. It is death that gradually leads the protagonist to the stately mansion of immortality. 754 is also a popular poem of Emily Dickinson where the protagonist visualizes her union and adventure with her Lord. In 1737, the poet affirms that she cannot become an obedient wife. She has learnt more from life than she could have ever learnt from being a mere wife. There is both an acceptance and a rejection of the limitations of a conventional woman's life in patriarchal New England. At heart, Emily Dickinson is a rebel, a dissenter.

*Dickinson.*

We have already told you that Emily Dickinson led a more or less secluded life in Amherst, Massachusetts. There is no wonder that she is preoccupied with the plight of an individual, especially a woman brought up in New England. Death and immortality are two major preoccupations in the sombre world created by Emily Dickinson. Solitude and introversion are two other preoccupations of the poet who published only seven poems in her life, that too anonymously. Her poems have also been described as her letters to the world. As she did not give titles to her poems, they are remembered either through the first line of the poem or through the numbers allotted to them in Thomas H. Johnson's standard edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you some understanding of some of the most significant poems of Emily Dickinson.

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

3.0	Objectives
3.1	Introduction
3.2	<i>The Soul Selects Her Own Society</i> (303)
3.3	<i>I'm Saying Every Day</i> (373)
3.4	<i>It Would Never Be Common-More-I-Said</i> (430)
3.5	<i>I Measure Every Grief I Meet</i> (561)
3.6	<i>Because I Could Not Stop For Death</i> (712)
3.7	<i>My Life Had Stood - A Loaded Gun</i> (751)
3.8	<i>Rearrange a Wife's Affection</i> (1737)
3.9	<i>Let Us Sum Up</i>
3.10	Questions
3.11	Glossary
3.12	Suggested Reading

Structure

## UNIT 3 THE TEXT 2: EMILY DICKINSON

## 3.2 "THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY"

303, THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY is a short poem in which Emily Dickinson presents the drama of her soul. The narrator says that the soul selects her own companions, her own society. Then, the soul shuts the door. She doesn't let in outsiders and intruders. The majority of the people outside the door may appear divine and enchanting to the ordinary people of the world but to the narrator the "divine majority" doesn't simply exist. The narrator is different and is quite contented to belong to the minority of one.

The narrator is unmoved, that is not disturbed by the exclusion of the so-called divine majority. She also notices a chariot stopping near her low gate. An emperor may get down from the chariot and kneel before the mat in front of the narrator's small, restricted kingdom. But the narrator is not influenced by the emperor's august presence.

The narrator says that she, perhaps the soul, is from a large, ample nation and she chooses one from the crowd and then closes the valves of her attention to the outsiders. In other words, her attention would be focussed on the chosen one.

Who is the chosen one? God? The Bridgroom? Father? The soul?  
Solitude? Guess.

303

The Soul selects her own Society—

Then—shuts the Door—

To her divine Majority—

Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the chariots—pausing—

At her low Gate—

Unmoved an Emperor be kneeling

Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—

Choose One—

Then—close the Valves of her attention—

Like Stone—

## 3.3. "I'M SAYING EVERYDAY"

373, *I'm Saying Everyday* is a poem in which another drama is unfolded vividly. The narrator (I) says that if she becomes a Queen the other day, she will do it in her own way, that is in her own style. She will decorate herself a little. She will also find that she is not an ordinary person. She has become a Bourbon. Nobody will be able to treat her superciliously, that is with cold disdain. Nobody will be able to say that the day before she was a beggar in the market.

People say that the court is a grand, stately place. She will be able to mix and mingle with the Majesty. Who is the Majesty? The King or God? She will also feel that her rank has risen high. She can sing a song to please the Majesty. Her life may be brief but she will mix and mingle with the Majesty. There will be no cricket in the meadow, and no bee will be able to equal her accent.

She feels that she must be ready for the change, for the transformation. She doesn't want to meet the majesty in her old gown. She also doesn't want to be deemed a rustic, an uncivilized, barbarous fellow.

Emily Dickinson

373

I'm saying every day

"If I should be a Queen, tomorrow"—

I'd do this way—

And so I deck, a little,

If it be, I wake a Bourbon,

None on me, bend supercilious—

With "This was she—

Begged in the Market place—

Yesterday:"

Court is a stately place—

I've heard men say—

So I loop my apron, against the Majesty

With bright Pins of Buttercup—

That not too plain—

Rank—overtake me—

And perch my Tongue

On Twigs of singing—rather high—

But this, might be my brief Term

To qualify—

Put from my simple speech all plain word—

Take other accents, as such I heard

Though but for the Cricket—just,

And but for the Bee—

Not in all the Meadow—

One accost me—

Better to be ready—

Than did next morn

Meet me in Aragon—

My old Gown—On—

And the surprised Air

Rustics—wear—

Summoned—unexpectedly—

To Exeter—

### 3.4 "IT WOULD NEVER BE COMMON—MORE—I SAID"

430, *It Would Never Be Common—More—I Said* is again a poem in which difference is celebrated. The narrator (I) says that her plight is not common. She is extraordinary. She is unique. She is different—different from everyone. It is morning. The narrator has been in bliss. She has had much joy. There has been a red glow upon her cheeks. There has been a red glow in her eyes as well. She has no need to speak. It is so eloquent, so palpable. She has been walking as if she had wings. Her feet have been as unnecessary to her as boots will be for birds. She has also been bubbling, bursting with joy. She has been giving love to every creature she met. She has been showering gifts on the whole world.

Suddenly, everything changes, changes for worse. She loses her riches, her wealth. There is a Goblin who deprives her of all warmth, all joy. Something fearful happens to her palace. She becomes a beggar. She tries to hold on to sounds. She gropes after shapes. She feels wilderness all around her. Her golden lines are wiped out. She is able to see sackcloth hanging upon the nail. She begins to wonder where her India made brocade is, that is her riches, her wealth.

430

It would never be Common – more I said –  
 Difference – had begun –  
 Many a bitterness – had been –  
 But that old sort – was done –

Or – if it sometime – showed – as 'twill –  
 Upon the Downiest – Morn –  
 Such bliss – had I – for all the years –  
 'Twould give an Easier – pain –

I'd so much joy – I told it – Red  
 Upon my simple cheek –  
 I felt it publish – in my Eye –  
 'Twas needless – any speak –

I walked – as wings – my body bore –  
 The feet – I former used –  
 Unnecessary – now to me –  
 As boots – would be – to Birds –

I put my pleasure all abroad –  
 I dealt a word of Gold  
 To every Creature – that I met –  
 And Dowered – all the World –

When – suddenly – my Riches shrank –  
 A Goblin – drank my Dew –  
 My Palaces – dropped tenantless –  
 Myself – was beggared – too –

I clutched at wounds –  
 I groped at shapes  
 I touched the tops of Films –  
 I felt the Wilderness roll back  
 Along my Golden lines –

The Sackcloth – hangs upon the nail –  
 The Frock I used to wear –  
 But where my moment of Brocade  
 My – drop – of India?

### 3.5 "I MEASURE EVERY GRIEF I MEET"

561, *I Measure Every Grief I Meet* is a poem that shows the narrator's (I)

preoccupation with grief that she finds in the world. She examines the origin and intensity of grief carefully. She also wonders if there is any grief in the world like her grief. She is not sure if other people are able to endure their grief for a long time. She marvels at the old roots of her pain. She can't remember the date her pain began

She wonders if life will continue to be full of hurt. She also wonders if others would like to die so that pain might come to an end.

Emily Dickinson

She can see a smile on some faces—a faint, weak smile. It is like the light of a lamp that has very little oil. She wonders if there is any balm for their grief. She wonders if they would continue to bear pain. Perhaps, their pain would touch infinity.

Life is, for the narrator, bristling with pain. Death comes only once. It nails the eyes. She is comforted when she thinks of her pain. And also when she thinks of the cross.

I measure every Grief I meet  
With narrow, probing, Eyes—  
I wonder if It weighs like Mine—  
Or has an Easter size.

I wonder if They bore it long—  
Or did it just begin—  
I could not tell the Date of Mine—  
It feels so old a pain—  
I wonder if it hurts to live—  
And if They have to try—  
And whether—could They choose between—  
It would not be—to die—

I note that Some—gone patient long—  
At length, renew their smile—  
An imitation of a Light  
That has so little Oil—

I wonder if when years have piled—  
Some Thousands—on the Harm—  
That hurt them early—such a lapse  
Could give them any Balm—

Or would they go on aching still

Through Centuries of Nerve—  
Enlightened to a larger Pain—  
In Contrast with the Love—

The Grieved—are many—I am told—  
There is the various Cause—  
Death—is but one—and comes but once—  
And only nails the eyes—

There's Grief of Want—and Grief of Cold—  
A sort they call 'Despair'—  
There's Banishment from native Eyes—  
In sight of Native Air—

And though I may not guess the kind—  
Correctly—yet to me  
A piercing comfort it affords  
In passing Calvary—

To note the fashions—of the Cross—  
And how they're mostly worn—  
Still fascinated to presume  
That Some—are like My Own—

## 3.6 "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH"

712, *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* is one of the most popular and anthologized poems of Emily Dickinson. The narrator (I) says that she couldn't stop for death but death was kind enough to stop for her. In the carriage where she was travelling there were only two companions' death and immortality. They drove slowly. Death, the driver of the carriage, was not at all in a hurry. The narrator had given up her life of labour and her leisure as well. She did it because death was not frightening. Death looked civil and acceptable to the narrator.

In the course of their journey, they passed a school where children were playing with vigour. They also passed the fields where the ears of grain were gazing at them. They passed the sun as well, the sun that was setting. The narrator had a gown made of gossamer. She also had a tippet around her neck and a tulle made of soft, fine silk. In other words, she was attired like a bride.

They also passed before a House that seemed like a swelling of the ground. The roof of the House was hardly visible. The cornice was in the ground. Centuries have passed from that day. Yet it seems it has been shorter than a day. The narrator felt that the carriage in which she had travelled in the company of death was heading towards Eternity. In other words, it is only through death that the narrator attains immortality. The poem is justly celebrated and is a remarkable acceptance of death. It also reminds one of Keats' dictum that death is the meed of life.

712

Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—he knew no haste

And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,

For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess—in the Ring—

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—

We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—he passed Us—

The Dews drew quivering and chill—

For only Gossamer, my Gown—

My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground—

The Roof was scarcely visible—

The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity—

751, *My Life Had Stood - A Loaded Gun* is another popular and anthologized poem by Emily Dickinson. It is a poem in which the narrator (I) admits that her life has been a loaded gun. It is an extremely striking image which perhaps, conveys the explosive potential of the narrator. The loaded gun has been kept in a corner of her apartment. The implication, perhaps, is that the explosive potential of the protagonist has remained confined to a small corner/of her apartment. She has had no opportunity to realize her potential in all its fulness. One can also safely affirm that there is something dangerous, something fierce about the protagonist. She is not an ordinary, conventional woman of nineteenth century New England. She is different.

The second phase of the poem indicates a kind of change in the protagonist's life style. She is chosen by her Master. She is also carried away from the narrow confines of her apartment. They live a life of freedom, a life of pioneers. They roam freely in excellent woods. They hunt the doe. When she speaks to her Master, her voice is echoed by the mountains. When she smiles, the whole valley glows. It seems that as the pleasure of companionship bursts out of her face it looks like Vesuvius, a volcano in Italy full of pent-up lava.

When night comes and the day is over, the ardent protagonist guards her Master. She acts like a vigilant watchman. The protagonist says that she is a deadly foe to any intruder who may dare to harm her Master. If she can spot the guy, she would release the trigger of the gun and shoot him dead. The "gun" in the poem is more than a metaphor. It is also literal. The protagonist knows how to wield the gun. There is something of the pioneer and the frontier in this excellent poem. The protagonist is such a deadly shot that the intruder has no chance to escape. He dies.

The protagonist, however, says at the end that He (perhaps the Master) is more likely to live longer than her. It would be better that he lives longer than the protagonist. It is true that the protagonist can press the trigger of the gun and kill, like a pioneer, but she does not have the tenacity and the power to accept death. What the narrator wants to say is that only those who can accept death, who have the power to die, can redeem themselves. One can see the poem 751 affirm the core of the poem 712. Accepting death calmly is a greater virtue than killing the foe.

## 751

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—  
In Corners—till a Day

The Owner passed—identified—

And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—

And now We hunt the Doe—

And every time I speak for Him—

The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light

Upon the Valley glow—

It is as a Vesuvian face

Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—

I guard My Master's Head—

'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's

Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—  
 None sit the second time—  
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
 Or an emphatic Thumb—  
 Though I than He—may longer live  
 He longer must—than I—  
 For I have but the power to kill,  
 Without—the power to die—

### 3.8 "REARRANGE A WIFE'S AFFECTION"

*Rearrange a Wife's Affection* is a poem in which the narrator (I) has denounced the miserable plight of a wife. She has also portrayed the sad life of a single woman. The society pretends to put in order, that is tame and domesticate a woman into the mould of a traditional wife. This is to be achieved by amputating ruthlessly her spotted heart. In other words, through stifling her natural impulses. It is also to be achieved by making her look like a man with a beard. That is, not only her natural impulses are ruthlessly curbed but even her natural looks are made to appear harsh and forbidding.

Note: the phrase "reckled bosom," perhaps, refers to the weaknesses and foibles that a woman is likely to have.

The narrator urges her strong natural impulses to blush that is to feel a sense of shame. She also urges her desires as a woman to blush, that is to feel a sense of shame. The compound of shame and guilt is due to the pressures exerted by the society in New England. The reality, however, is that the protagonist, a single woman—has learnt far more as a spinster than she would have learnt as a traditional wife. She has had no experience of wifehood, that is domestic drudgery and slavery yet seven years of solitary life as a spinster has taught her an unforgettable lesson.

Her life has been such that love has not leaped its socket, that is love has not fulfilled her natural hunger. She also could not experience trust that is basic for one's growth. As a result of which pain, narrow stifling pain, has been entrenched in her life. She has also no taste of constancy in love that would have given her a sense of fulfillment. There has been no balm, no medicine for the anguish and grief that has seared her. Life has been a terrible burden for her, although so far she has endured the burden triumphantly. She is not likely to be crowned, that is to attain fulfillment and happiness. Till sunset, that is till the end of her life, she would be pricked by thorns. It is, perhaps, only after her death that she would finally be crowned. In other words, she would put on her diadem. These lines appear to be prophetic because Emily Dickinson got recognition as a great poet only after her death. As a Romantic poet, her poetry is a mirror of her apprehensions and hope.

There is, however, a big secret in her life. It is big but it is also a sort of bandage over her eyes. That secret, that mystery would never vanish. It would disappear only the day she would die and her tired flesh would at last have some rest. She would be then released from the fever, the agony and the prison of life. She would be buried in the grave and later on she would be united with him, that is the bridegroom.

In other words, it is only after death that she would attain fulness and triumph. She could not endure to be a wife. She also could not be happy as a single woman in nineteenth century New England. That was the dilemma of Emily Dickinson expressed so vividly and trenchantly in 1737.



1. What is the significance of the narrator (I) in most of the poems of Emily Dickinson?
2. Bring out the implication of the queen-beggar syndrome in 373 and 430.
3. How does Emily Dickinson visualize grief in 561?
4. Do you agree with the statement that *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* is the most perfectly realized poem written by Emily Dickinson?
5. Compare and contrast 712 and 754 in their treatment of death.
6. "Wifehood seemed a curse to Emily Dickinson." Is it a fair assessment of the poet's outlook as reflected in 1737?
7. "Emily Dickinson's poetry is that of a rebel." Discuss with reference to 1737.

### 3.10 QUESTIONS

Emily Dickinson led a large secluded life in Amherst, New England. Solitude led to a life devoted to reading and writing.

She had, however, a number of literary mentors. Her poems were, however, her letters to the world. She had published only seven poems in her life. They were anonymous publications.

It was only after her death that her poems were published on a large scale. She made her reputation as one of the most intense and Romantic poet of New England. Her poetry is largely a poetry of rebellion and confession.

### 3.9 LET US SUM UP

1737  
Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!  
When they dislocate my Brain!  
Amputate my freckled Bosom!  
Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fashness—  
Blush, my unacknowledged clay—  
Seven years of troth have taught thee  
More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped its socket—  
Trust entrenched in narrow pain—  
Constancy thro' fire—awarded—  
Anguish—bare of anodyne!

Burden—borne so far triumphant—  
None suspect me of the crown,  
For I wear the "Thorns" till sunset—  
Then—my diadem put on.

Big my Secret but it's *bandaged*—  
It will never get away  
Till the Day its Weary Keeper  
Leads it through the Grave to thee.

1. *Modern American Poetry 1865-1950* by Alan Shucard, Fred Moramaco, William Sullivan (Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1989).
2. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Little, Brown and Co., Boston, Toronto, 1960).
3. *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* edited by A. Robert Lee (Vision and Barnes Noble, London, 1985).

### 3.12 SUGGESTED READING

Bourbon:	Royal dynasty of France in medieval age.
Aragon:	a Christian kingdom in North East Spain in eleventh century.
Exeter:	a university town in Devonshire, England.
Calvary:	hill outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified.
Vesuvius:	a mountain in Italy which erupts and emits fire and lava.
Elder-Ducks:	wild ducks.

### 3.11 GLOSSARY

## UNIT 4 STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Structure	
4.0	Objectives
4.1	Introduction
4.2	Theme and Imagery in Walt Whitman
4.3	Theme and Imagery in Emily Dickinson
4.4	Free Verse in Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson
4.5	Let Us Sum Up
4.6	Questions
4.7	Suggested Reading

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the innovation in structure and style that helped Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson to cultivate their unique voices in American poetry.

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

We have already told you that Whitman is a bard who celebrates in his poetry the sheer diversity and vitality of American Republic in nineteenth century. His focus is as much on the individual, the American Adam, as it is on the collective. It is not possible to assess the innovation made by Whitman in the realm of American poetry in purely literary and aesthetic terms. We have to bear in mind the fact that much of his life was spent in Brooklyn and New York and his being a journalist made him a partisan in the toruous growth of American Republic before and after the *Civil War*. He was a bard of American democracy and he embraced not only the classics of European literature but also the slang and syntax of New York's street culture. In other words, his poems are a hybrid of literary sensibility and popular culture fashioned by carpenters, blacksmiths, cab-drivers and political orators of his time. He created a new voice that could express the subaltern's and marginal groups hunger for freedom and dignity within the ambience of American Republic in which class differences and the slavery of the blacks had become explosive issues leading to the *Civil War*. Betsy Erkkila has rightly observed in her excellent study, *Whitman: The Political Poet*, "The publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 was not an escape from politics but a continuation of politics by other means."

If Whitman is preoccupied with the making of the nation and healing the wounds of the *Civil War*, Emily Dickinson is preoccupied with the plight of a single woman in New England. Naturally "I" is very important in Emily Dickinson's poems. In other words, the confessional mode is very prominent in her poems. The liberal use of dashes in her poems helps the reader in realizing the passion and intensity behind her words. The pauses in her poems enable the reader to feel the abrupt change in the narrator's thought and feeling. If Whitman is a master of sustained eloquence over larger verbal units, Emily Dickinson is able to intensify the meaning through every word in her poems. Naturally, her poems are exquisite miniatures while Whitman's poems are more elaborate and produce, at best, the effect of a grand symphony.

### 4.2 THEME AND IMAGERY IN WALT WHITMAN

Walt Whitman was an innovator in the realm of American poetry in mid-nineteenth century. *Song of Myself* is his first long poem that shows his preoccupation with the

self. Naturally, "I" figures very prominently in the poem in which there is no beginning, no middle, no end. As there is no definite narrative thread, the poem is unfolded in the form of a random collage of scenes, queries, rhetorical passages, lyrical outbursts and affirmations. "You" is as prominent in *Song of Myself* as "I". We have already told you that "I" and "You" constitute the poles between which the poem swings. There is no wonder that the loose rambling poem begins with two memorable lines, "I celebrate myself, And what I assume you shall assume," and comes to an end with equally memorable lines, "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me at one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you", (line, 1345-47). One can safely affirm that the poet's self can be fully realized only in communion with the reader's "You." "You." "Song of Myself" is not only a celebration of the poet's all-inclusive self but is also a quest for a meaningful community, transcending the barriers of class, gender and colour. In that sense, "Song of Myself" is the most subversive poem ever written by Walt Whitman. There is no wonder that the Boston district attorney, Oliver Stevens, initiated proceedings to suppress the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It has also to be noted that Boston *Intelligence* responded to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in these words, "The author should be kicked from all decent society as below the level of brute" (*Whitman, The Political Poet*, p.308).

"You" in "Song of Myself" is not a fixed entity. It refers to the narrator's comrade with whom he has an intensely erotic experience. He is a loving bed-fellow who sleeps by his side at night. Like the Greeks, the narrator believed that man-man relationship helped one to realize the unbreakable bond between individuals. The narrator also catalogues the various mundane facts of life (see lines 13-20) which create a powerful impression of the temporal world of mid-nineteenth century America. The key relationship between "I" and "You" is also symbolized by the master metaphor of "grass." In section six of the poem, there is a most memorable evocation of "the grass." The grass could be a reflection of the narrator's youthful exuberance, could also be the handkerchief of God, could also be a child. The grass could also refer to a kind of vision that accepts both whites and blacks, men and women, Congressman and a native Indian. One can safely affirm that "grass" is the master metaphor that gives a kind of structural cohesion and focus to "Song of Myself." "Grass" stands both for the individual and the many, that is the collective. If "grass" brings out the full significance of "Song of Myself" the subversive thrust of the poem helps one to understand why Boston critics were so keen to ban *Leaves of Grass* from free circulation in New England. It shows Whitman's courage that he did not submit to censorship that would have made *Leaves of Grass* a conventional, sedate anthology of Victorian poems. He resisted even the pressure of his mentor Emerson who wanted him to delete his controversial poems like "A Woman Waits for Me", "To a Common Prostitute" and *Children of Adam from Leaves of Grass*.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is Whitman's second major poem in which his youthful exuberance is curbed and he shows restraint and self-control in describing a specific scene. From the beginning, I-You exchanges and encounter are present in the poem. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" "You" stands for a working man who is waiting for the ferry. The narrator (I) finds "You" very curious, very dear. He is dressed like ordinary workers but he is so "curious" to the narrator. He seems to stand alone and holds the narrator's attention. It is not only the present that strikes the narrator. The past and the future also hold his attention. The narrator is reminded of those who crossed the ferry in the past. He is also reminded of those who will do it in future. There is a kind of unbreakable bond between the past, the present and the future. "You" refers to an individual, and also refers to many who crossed the ferry in the past and those who will do it in the future. In other words, "You" is all-inclusive and embraces both men and women, whites and blacks, and country and town. One can see a kind of thematic unity between "Songs of Myself" and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*.

What is new in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is Whitman's focus on a specific scene and his capacity to celebrate the grandeur of Manhattan island along with his self-

knowledge in highlighting "the wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me" (line 78). Towards the end of the poem, there is a glowing evocation of the harbour where ships from all parts of the globe are anchoring. One can say that in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", Whitman not only continues I-You exchanges but also foreshadows American dream of globalization as presented in "Passage to India."

"When Lilies Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" is, perhaps, the most conventional poem written by Walt Whitman. Many of the conventions of pastoral elegy, including the mourning of nature and pathetic fallacy, the funeral procession, the placing of flowers on the coffin, the juxtaposition of death with nature's renewal and the return of spring have been used by the poet freely. There is no wonder that the elegy is not as provocative and controversial as "Song of Myself". The mood of melancholy and grief is all pervasive in the poem. The image of Venus drooping in the western sky is the most memorable metaphor used by the poet to mourn the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln. The recurrence of the image of the drooping star intensifies the mood of melancholy and grief. As against the image of the drooping star, Whitman has counterpoised the positive image of the blooming of the lily and the warbling of the thrush in the swamp. In the last two lines of the elegy Whitman has condensed the thematic core of the poem, "Lily and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, there in the fragrant pines, and the cedars dusk and dim" (line, 208-209). Like all great elegies like Shelley's "Adonais" and Arnold's "Thyrsis", "When Lilies last in the Dooryard Bloomed" is also an assertion of hope in a world driven by anger, hate and death. Walt Whitman's stark originality in this elegy lies in portraying death as a deliveress. (Kindly see lines 137-164 in the poem.)

Acceptance of death, without making a distinction between death due to illness or old age, and death as a violent act, gives to the poem an air of calm resignation. The poet's aim in philosophically accepting Lincoln's death was to minimise the animosity between the North and the South and to achieve a kind of reconciliation between the pro-Lincoln North and anti-Lincoln South. In other words, Whitman's intention in "When Lilies Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" was to heal the wounds of the Civil War.

There is no wonder that in "Passage to India" (1871-72) there is a sea-change in Whitman's mood because the poem reflects the buoyant optimism and exuberance of the post Civil War period. The dark forebodings of the Civil War are left far behind and the poet becomes a kind of bard, that is a singer who sings and celebrates the glory and exuberance of the New World. In the confident tone of an epic poet or a bard Whitman celebrates the opening of the Suez Canal, the completion of the Pacific Railroad linking the length and breadth of North America, and the laying down of cables across the Atlantic ocean, leading to a strong link between Europe and North America. The growth of modern science and technology has reduced the barriers of space and time and lead to the growth of a strong, cohesive and interdependent world. Whitman is also able to see the link between the past and the present. In first section of "Passage to India" the bard of American democracy asks in a rhetorical mode, "For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?" (line 13). As the poem is unfolded, one can see a kind of Hegelian dialectics operating. If the past is the thesis, the present is the antithesis and the future, visualized in such an ecstatic mood, is the synthesis of the thesis and the antithesis.

"Passage to India" is used as a refrain in section three and four of the poem and reminds us of the new frontier that has to be reached in the New World based on science and technology. In section two of the poem, the refrain has been slightly expanded in this manner "Passage O Soul to India" (line 16). In Section ten of the poem the refrain has been expanded still more, "Passage indeed O soul to primal thought" (line 165). In the last section of "Passage to India", the refrain has been repeated twice in a modified form, "Passage to more than India". That is, India is not the last, formidable frontier. Once India is assimilated and her ancient wisdom and lore is absorbed, there would be other frontiers to reach and conquer. Once globalization is achieved, the next movement would be into vast space. The bard is

able to visualize the new frontier beyond India in these memorable lines, "O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter! Passage to you?" (lines 241-42). The word "Passage" is repeated again and again in the last section of the poem and Whitman gives us a feeling that life is a perpetual journey. One cannot rest on one's laurels in the struggle of life. One has to go on and on. The lure of life as an adventure, as a perpetual journey, is also enhanced by the image of Christopher Columbus who is vividly presented as an explorer, as a tireless seeker of the New World. The unknown is symbolized in the last section of the poem through a memorable line, "Sail forth? steer for the deep waters only" (line 249). It is through the phrase "deep waters" that the distant, and the unknown is signified. There is a kind of bare simplicity and grandeur in the language and imagery used by Walt Whitman in "Passage to India." There is no wonder that Whitman regarded the poem as the best expression of his restless self. To sum up, Whitman is not only a bard of American democracy but a bard of the world as an interdependent entity. That is, as a global village in which science and technology of the West would be fused and synthesized with the wisdom and lore of the East.

### 4.3 THEME AND IMAGERY IN EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson's focus is on the plight of a single woman in nineteenth century New England. There is no wonder that solitude, grief, death and redemption figure prominently in her poems. We have already told you that her poems are fragments and could also be considered her letters to the world. In other words, they are in a confessional mode and give us a chance to peep into the drama of her soul. In her poem 303, she has used the image of the door to convey an idea of her solitude. The protagonist shuts the door firmly and doesn't allow outsiders and intruders to disturb her privacy. The protagonist becomes an introvert and deliberately excludes from her attention the external world of hurry, bustle and noise. The firmness of the protagonist's inversion is conveyed by the simile "Like stone" (line 12). It is clear that Emily Dickinson can make use of ordinary, common place objects like "door" and "stone" in order to intensify the meaning. In 373, the poet has used the image of a "Bourbon" to convey the idea of her being far from a beggar. There is something regal, something queenly about her. Emily Dickinson has also used the image of the "Bee" and the "Cricketer" in order to signify the resonance of her voice. In other words, the protagonist's royal status is not due to her birth but due to her unique voice. She could cultivate it due to her solitude and isolation from ordinary life.

In 430, Emily Dickinson lays stress on her difference from ordinary men and women. She has also used the image of "wings" and "boots" to convey her singularity. She has been walking as if wings propelled her frame. She also affirms that boots would be useless to her as they are to birds (lines 13-16). Once again one can notice the poet's capacity to use plain words in order to intensify her meaning. There is a touch of a fairy tale when the poet uses the image of a "Goblin" in order to convey her transformation into a beggar. Towards the end of the poem, Emily Dickinson uses the binary contrast of the "Sackcloth" and "Brocade" in order to convey the gap between reality and dream. While the coarse material of the sackcloth indicates the protagonist's actual humdrum status, the fine material of the India-made brocade is only a figment of the protagonist's imagination. In other words, the protagonist is in a miserable state of mind. Emily Dickinson has again visualized the various faces of grief in 561. She has used the image of a lamp that has "so little oil" and gives out a faint light to illumine darkness. She has also used the image of "nails" in order to convey the idea of death's irrevocability, that is absolute finality. Once death comes, eyes are nailed (line 28).

712 is one of the most memorable poem written by Emily Dickinson. It is an unforgettable picture of her encounter with death. While death is portrayed as a civil

and mild companion, the sheer horror of death is signified by the phrase "gazing grain" (line 11). Grain could be taken as a symbol of life and fertility but "gazing" conveys the stillness and fixity of eyes after death. The juxtaposition of "gazing" and "grain" seems to signify trenchantly the awesome fact of death encompassing life. There is also the presence of an extended bridal image in the poem in lines (15-16). It makes the poem so authentic and gripping.

751 is another remarkable poem of Emily Dickinson in which she has used the image of "a loaded gun" in order to describe the awesome potential of the protagonist. This poem has described the protagonist's adventure and togetherness with her Master. The protagonist's boundless joy and ecstasy has been signified by the phrase "a Vesuvian face" (line 10). It is a most original image and conveys most appropriately the protagonist's ecstasy in the company of her Master. At the end of the poem the protagonist has a realization that she can kill the enemy and guard her Master but she is still not ready to die, that is to accept death as the culmination of life. It is true that the protagonist has "an emphatic Thumb", that is she can release the trigger of the gun firmly and kill the intruder but she is still not ready to accept death. "The loaded gun" is both literal and metaphorical and signifies the protagonist's awesome potential of growth and fulfillment. In the absence of a willingness to accept death as the culmination of life, the protagonist's fulfillment is likely to be partial and incomplete. In other words, 751 is both a celebration of the protagonist's fierce loyalty to her Master and also a critique of her partial fulfillment.

Emily Dickinson's 1737 is a stern critique of the plight of a wife in mid-nineteenth century New England. She has used the strong word "amputate" in order to convey the mutilation of a young woman's natural impulses. The word "treckled" signifies the spots and natural weaknesses that a young woman is likely to have. The grotesque image of "bearded like a man" shows the unnatural state in which a young woman finds herself. She ceases to be a natural graceful young woman. "Wifehood" has been pictured as a state in which a young woman's mind ceases to grow. The word "bandaged" is used by the poet to convey the wounded sensibility of a single woman. In other words, neither a married woman nor a single woman is able to attain fulfillment and maturity in New England. Emily Dickinson has used the word "thorns" in order to convey the miserable plight of a single woman, and used the image of "my Diadem" (line 16), in order to convey the remote possibility of attaining fulfillment after death. The word "Sunset" is perhaps a signifier of death. There is no wonder that the protagonist's preoccupation with death is almost unending. Without death, there cannot be any fulfillment. That seems to be the core of Emily Dickinson's confrontation with life.

#### 4.4 FREE VERSE IN WALT WHITMAN AND EMILY DICKINSON

Free verse (verse libre), poetry without a fixed metrical pattern, having a loosely organized rhythm. ("*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, James D. Hart, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965, p.295). It is clear that free verse can be understood largely in terms of what it doesn't possess. There is an absence of a regular metre and rhyme. Since the constraint of metre and rhyme is not there, free verse is supposed to give an opportunity to the poet to express his ideas, feelings and responses with utmost freedom. T.S. Eliot has also tried to define free verse in terms of three negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhythm, (3) absence of metre. (*Selected Prose*, Penguin Books in association with Faber and Faber, 1953). One has, however, to go beyond the negations in order to have some idea of what free verse actually possesses and in what way it differs from prose which also is marked by an absence of metrical pattern and rhythm.

As far as Walt Whitman is concerned, free verse does not have any traditional metre and rhyme. He makes use of prose that has both literary words and slang juxtaposed and gives the flavour of living American speech. In Whitman, there is something grand and epic about free verse. Sentences follow sentences and they are linked by syntactic devices. In a poem like "Passage of India" Whitman has also made a skillful use of refrains and glowing images. Through repetition of certain key words and refrains the poet is able to give a lilt and resonance to his verse. In other words, free verse, as used by Whitman, has its own rhythm, loosely knit, yet rhythm all the same. It is the pressure of ideas, feelings and emotional responses that give a kind of shape and urge to Whitman's free verse. Where this kind of pressure is not built up Whitman's free verse becomes flat and prosaic. He is as uneven a poet as Wordsworth was in England. The difference between his best and his worst verse is enormous.

As compared to Whitman's free verse, the free verse of Emily Dickinson is condensed and packed with images. She also uses pauses, indicated by the liberal use of dashes, in order to convey the subtle changes of her thought and feelings. While Whitman wants to absorb the whole world into his free-flowing verse, Emily Dickinson wants to portray the drama of her soul in all its minuteness and specificity. While Whitman uses the hammer like a blacksmith, Emily Dickinson uses the knife with the precision and deftness of a surgeon. That is free verse, emancipated from own unique mode. If free verse has the strength of an epic in the hands of Whitman, in the hands of Emily Dickinson it has the exquisite fineness of a miniature painting. While Whitman's free verse has vigour, Emily Dickinson's free verse has precision.

#### 4.5 LET US SUM UP

Whitman's major poems are a reflection of the cracks in the edifice of American Republic due to the Civil War (1861-65) which intensified the North-South divide. In his own way, he wanted to heal the wound of the Civil War. In other words, Whitman's endeavour was to strengthen the bond between man and man, man and woman and man and nature. At its best, his poems have something of the epic and are concerned with the making of a nation. Emily Dickinson's poems are minute dissection and exquisite portrayal of the plight of a single woman in New England. Death is one of the major preoccupation of her poetry. Acceptance of death is, perhaps, the core of her vision.

#### 4.6 QUESTIONS

1. "Song of Myself" is more than a simple song. It is an I-you dialogue. Discuss.
2. The theme of human brotherhood in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is predominant. Do you agree?
3. Abraham Lincoln is never explicitly mentioned in "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed" yet his martyrdom is celebrated by the poet. Could you tell us why?
4. "Passage to India" is a poem that celebrates globalization and space exploration. Do you agree?
5. What is the difference between the free verse of Walt Whitman and the free verse of Emily Dickinson?



**4.7 SUGGESTED READING**

1. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* by James D. Hart (New York, Oxford University Press, 1965).
2. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* edited by John Hayward (Penguin Books, in Association with Faber and Faber, 1953).
3. *Whitman* edited by Roy Harrey Pearce (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Engle Wood Cliffs, N.J. 1962).

6. Examine the charge of immorality against the poetry of Walt Whitman. Do you think there was a Feminist voice of dissent in Emily Dickinson's poems?
- 7.

Structure and Style

As far as Emily Dickinson is concerned only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. Even her literary mentor like Thomas Wentworth Higginson felt that her poems were too fragile and delicate to be published in *The Atlantic*. Emerson felt that the lady wrote as if she was suffering from some kind of fever. It was, however, the publication of the Harvard edition of Emily Dickinson's poems in (1955) that brought her poems in limelight. Conrad Aiken described her as the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism. Allen Tate felt that Emily Dickinson's poems are so different from conventional poems popular in her time. That is why he felt that her poems are not widely read. Ivor Winters was of the view that Emily Dickinson was a product of New England Puritanism and also its staunch critic. It is, however, the singular achievement of contemporary critics like Donna Dickinson in *Emily Dickinson* (1985) and Helen McNeill in *Emily Dickinson* (1986) to bring out the contemporary relevance of Emily Dickinson's unconventional, dash-laden, tenebrous poems. They are a mirror of a woman who realized intensely the miserable plight of a single woman who wanted to live a full and vigorous life of unhindered creativity. In other words, Emily Dickinson's poems are radical and subversive in their own way. One can safely say that both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are two of the most authentic voices of nineteenth century American

We have already told you that Emerson had greeted the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. In spite of his reservations about the erotic in Walt Whitman, Emerson felt that the first great American poet had arrived on the somewhat dreary literary scene. But on the whole, the literary establishment was too conservative to respond adequately to Whitman's radical, subversive poetry. It was, however, in the twentieth century that critics like F. O. Matthiessen, R. W. B. Lewis and Charles Feidelson could accept Walt Whitman's radicalism and also appreciate the American idiom in all its particularity. It was F. O. Matthiessen who pointed out that *Leaves of Grass* was primarily a language experiment. It has been the singular achievement of contemporary critics who could relate Walt Whitman's radical text to the tumultuous time of the Civil War in America. The foremost critics of the contemporary age like Betsy Erkkila in *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989), David S. Reynolds in *Walt Whitman's America* (1996) and Martin Klammer in *Whitman, Slavery, and The Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (1995) have recreated for us the relevance of Whitman's poetry both for his time and also for our time.

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the shifting critical response to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson from the nineteenth century to the contemporary time.

## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

5.0	Objectives
5.1	Introduction
5.2	Nineteenth Century, Modern and Contemporary response to Walt Whitman
5.3	Nineteenth Century, Modern and Contemporary response to Emily Dickinson
5.4	Let Us Sum Up
5.5	Glossary
5.6	A Select Bibliography

Structure

## UNIT 5 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

5.2 NINETEENTH CENTURY, MODERN AND  
WHITMAN  
CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE TO WALT

Alan Shucard has made a pointed reference to the detractors of Walt Whitman in *American Poetry* (Wayne Publishers, Boston, 1988) in the seventh chapter of the book. There was an anonymous reviewer in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* of 1<sup>st</sup> January 1860. He was of the view, "He has undertaken to be an artist without learning the first principle of art, and has presumed to put forth 'poems' without possessing a spark of the poetic faculty" (p. 176). Even an accomplished critic like Mathew Arnold said in a letter to W.D.D. Connor, "While you think it is . . . [Whitman's] highest merit that he is so unlike anyone else, to me this seems to be his demerit" (*ibid.*, p. 176). While we are today attracted by the originality of Walt Whitman's diction and syntax, a critic like Mathew Arnold, steeped in the classical tradition, found Walt Whitman's originality unacceptable. Another reviewer in the *London Critic* of 1 April, 1856 was of the view, Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art, as a hog is with mathematics. His poems—"we must call them so for convenience-- . . . resemble nothing so much as the war-cry of the Red Indians" (*ibid.*, p. 176). There were also some reviewers who were not so hostile. A reviewer is the *Brooklyn Daily Times* of 29 September, 1855 described Walt Whitman as "A rude child of the people!—no imitation—no foreigner—but a growth and idiom of America" (*ibid.*, p. 177).

The critics of the Transcendentalist school were far more perceptive in their response to Walt Whitman than the critics who belonged to the establishment. For example—Thoreau wrote in a letter to his friend Harrison Blake, "Though rude and sometimes ineffectual, it is a great primitive poem—an alarm or trumpet note ringing through the American camp. Wonderfully like the Orientals, too, considering that when I asked him if he had read them, he answered, 'No: tell me about them'" (*ibid.*, p. 177). One can also refer to Emerson's letter to Walt Whitman, "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I find incomparable things said incomparable well, as they must be. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start" (*ibid.*, p. 177). There is no wonder that there is something of the Transcendentalist's faith in the divinity of man in Walt Whitman's poetry. By and large, American critics have been preoccupied with the stress on the individual and individualism in Walt Whitman's poetry.

In the twentieth century Walt Whitman became the focus of a lively debate between the William Carlos Williams School of Critics and the T.S. Eliot School of Critics. While the former were rooted in the specific nature of the American locale and reality, the latter went abroad physically and intellectually like Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Among the former, mention can be made of Vernon Parrington who lauded Walt Whitman as a heroic democrat, and "a great figure, the greatest assuredly in our literature" (*Whitman: The Political Poet*, p. 8). F.O. Matthiessen laid stress on the linguistic resourcefulness of Walt Whitman along with an appreciation of his radicalism as a Christian socialist (*ibid.*, p. 8-9). In *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (1955), Richard Chase considered Walt Whitman as a comic, albeit neurotic genius, and a master of New Critical wit and irony (*ibid.*, p. 9). R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955) laid stress on the new Adam that figures so prominently in Walt Whitman's poetry. The expatriates like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, however, found Walt Whitman's poetry too political and radical for their literary taste. Ezra Pound, in particulars found Walt Whitman to be "a pig-headed father" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

It has been the singular achievement of contemporary critics like Joseph J. Rubin in *The Historic Whitman* (1973), Betsy Erkkila's *Whitman: the Political Poet*, and David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1996) that Walt Whitman's radical poetry has been evaluated in the context of the Civil War and the cracks in the American Republic. It has also been pinpointed that Walt Whitman's explicitly political poems degenerate into journalistic propaganda but his authentic radicalism is best expressed in his most personal poems like *Song of Myself*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and *A Passage to India*. One can, however, still find the largely psychological and transcendental approach in Paul Zweig's *Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (1984) and David Cavitch's *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman* (1985).

### 5.3 NINETEENTH CENTURY, MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE TO EMILY DICKINSON

Nineteenth century response to Emily Dickinson's poems showed a kind of inability to comprehend the hard core of her poetry. Her literary mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson felt that her poems were too delicate and, perhaps, fragile and formless to be published in a popular journal like the *Atlantic*. A literary master like Emerson was of the view, "A Miss Dickinson (sic) writes verses as if threatened with fevers... The few pieces of hers that I have before me are . . . heavy with religious sentiment," (*Emily Dickinson* by Donna Dickenson, 1985, p.40). In other words, Emerson regarded Emily Dickinson as a New England Puritan steeped in the orthodoxy of sin and redemption. There is no wonder that Emily Dickinson remained practically unknown and unappreciated in the nineteenth century.

It was in 1890 that *Poems by Emily Dickinson* was published by Robert Brothers of Boston. This slender volume was followed in 1891 by one hundred sixty six poems under the title *Poems, Second Series*. These poems were read by discerning readers. In 1896, Mrs. Todd edited *Poems, Third Series*. It was, as we have told you earlier, the publication of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), that history was made and all the poems of Emily Dickinson were made available to the readers whose number kept on growing. Apart from the intensity of vision that is found in her poems, including a preoccupation with death and immortality, attention of the critics was also caught by her wit, precision of language and Emerson-like use of epigrams and irony. In other words, Emily Dickinson was a far more complicated modern poet rather than a dogmatic Puritan. The description of Emily Dickinson as a metaphysical dimension of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Conrad Aiken regarded her as a singular mixture of Puritan and free thinker. The problems of good and evil, of life and death, immortality and transcendence, however, continued to preoccupy her mind. Allen Tate pointed out that Emily Dickinson's poetry is bristling with ideas and the ideas revolve round heaven and hell, sin and redemption. In other words, she is steeped in Puritan dogma of sin and redemption as a result of God's grace. Allen Tate also felt that in the history of Puritanism, Emily Dickinson came between Hawthorne and Emerson. Ivor Winters was of the opinion that Emily Dickinson not only affirmed New England Puritanism but also questioned and discarded much of its theology. Some critics are, however, of the view that questions are far more important in Emily Dickinson's poetry than final answers. The quest is far more important than the destination.

We have already told you that the contemporary critics like Donna Dickenson in *Emily Dickinson* (1985), Helen McNeil in *Emily Dickinson* (1986) and Jane Donahue Eberwein in *Strategies of Limitations* (1985) have attempted to look upon Emily

Dickinson's poetry from a fresh perspective. They regard her poems as the mirror of a single woman who wanted to live a life of free creativity and bold exploration of the female psyche. The pain that figures so prominently in Emily Dickinson's tough and provocative poems is not an abstraction. It is the concrete experience of a woman, a single woman who was resolutely constricted by the conventions of New England's male-dominated patriarchy. One could end this brief note with a quotation from Helen McNeil, "I am acutely conscious that recent criticism, including mine, has only barely begun to understand the breadth of Dickinson's accomplishment" (*Emily Dickinson*, p.XI).

Critical  
Perspective

## 5.4 LET US SUM UP

Walt Whitman was a poet who was partially understood by the critics of his own time. Emerson greeted him warmly but he had strong reservations about his eroticism. Thoreau regarded him as something of a beast.

While the modern critics laid emphasis on Walt Whitman's free verse and transcendentalism, the contemporary critics regard him largely as the healer of the wounds of the Civil War. They also pinpoint the presence of slang and street culture in Walt Whitman's radical, subversive poetry.

The modern critics of Emily Dickinson laid stress on her preoccupation with New England Puritanism but the contemporary critics look upon her poetry from a feminist perspective. They remind us that Emily Dickinson was a single woman hemmed in by the conventions of patriarchy in New England. Far from submitting to patriarchy, she subverted it tenaciously.

## 5.5 GLOSSARY

Eclaire:  
Rondure:  
Sirius:  
Jupiter:  
Trinitas:

make bright, illumine  
globe moving in space  
the brightest star in the sky  
fifth largest planet from the sun  
three parts or aspects

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